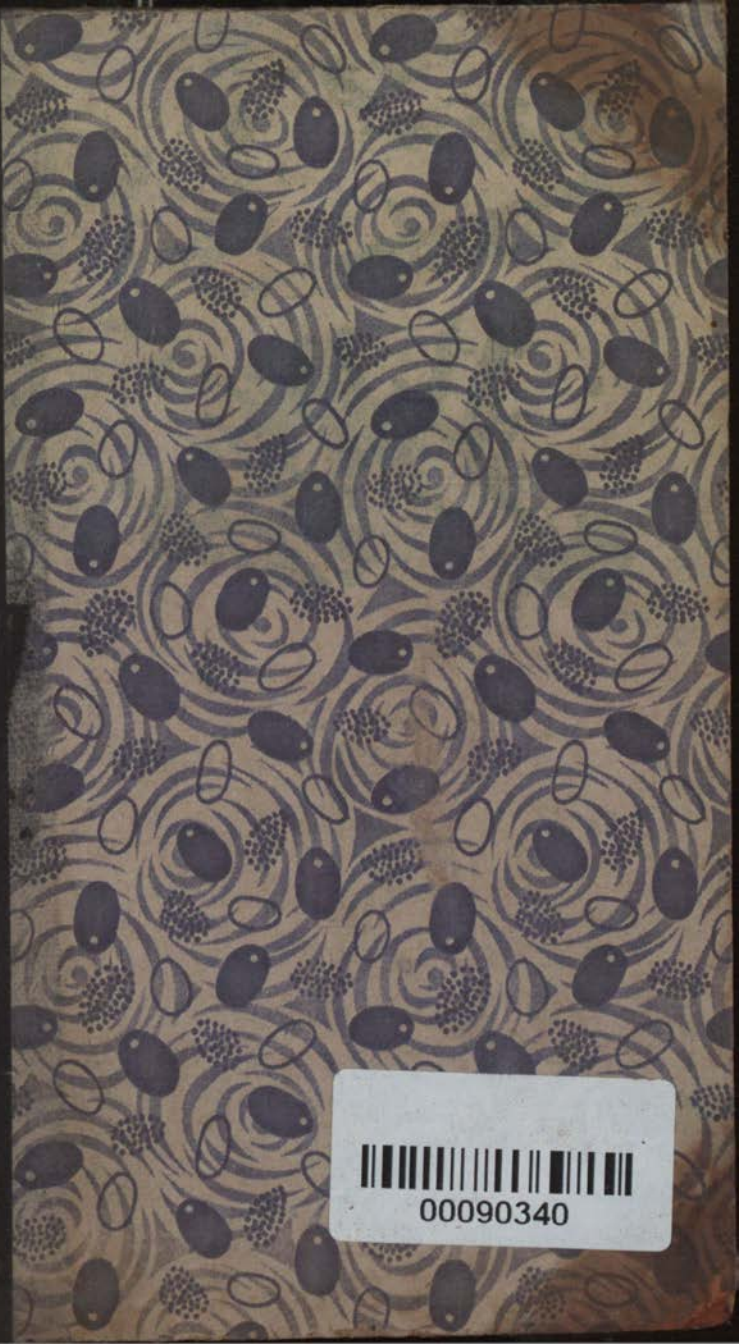
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THE BARBER OF PUTNEY

BY

J. B. MORTON.

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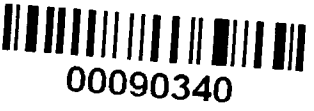

"For the wars we fight to-day are not like other wars, and the wonders of them are not like other wonders. If we do not see in them the saga and the epic, how shall we tell of them?"

"We are at war, and see so many strange things: some we must forget, some we must remember, and we cannot choose which."

Dunsany.

TO

DOROTHY.

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THE BARBER OF PUTNEY.

CHAPTER I.

BEGINNINGS.

"So long, old girl! So long, Steve. Keep the pot boiling."

Tim Himrick had kissed his wife and shaken hands with the assistant, who was sharpening a razor; then he had turned his back on the barber's shop, and on Putney. There was an impression of his wife waving to him under the aggressive "Shave—2d."; of a walk down Putney High Street, and of a feeling of sudden importance. Clearly he was on his way to becoming a soldier. He had been attested and medically examined, and the three days granted him at his depôt were over. He had walked over the bridge and climbed into an omnibus, letting his thoughts play about the obscurities of the future, making pictures of an entirely new manner of life.

Greater London all about him, he had jumped off the omnibus and passed through the barrack gates. Particulars had to be given at the orderly room; he was led there by a silent Corporal. They asked him his age, religion, profession, next of kin, address; and an hour later he paraded on the barrack square, one of a party of recruits, bound for their battalion. In the interval a regimental barber had cropped his hair, in a vigorous manner that hurt all there was of the barber in Tim's soul; for he was a barber with a Putney reputation. There had followed a visit to the Quartermaster's stores, where he was given a mysterious kit, and fitted out in khaki. He recalled how he had fallen into his place, feeling like a child who has donned trousers for the first time. There was a march to the station, which made him feel "recruitish all over." People did stare so, and he was very conscious of the narrow chest that had made the doctors hesitate a moment in their examination. Besides, marching was a new thing to him. "Marching and walking is as different as chalk and cheese," he said.

At the station the party ran the gauntlet again. Whispered criticism charged the air with something electric that gave him a shock all over. He thought they must be

pointing out his new boots, his awkwardness, and the absurd marmalade colour of his buttons. "Can't get the hang of things, somehow," he had confided to himself, halting by the side of the train. A Sergeant with a big silver-mounted stick indicated a seat and got in himself. Tim remembered how he had looked with a kind of awe at the Sergeant's Boer War ribbon.

"Bit strange, like, at first," Tim had said. "Queer feeling, like trying to swim."

"Blokes soon knock down to it," said the Sergeant. "All got to go through it. Soon get you into shape. Chuck yourself about a bit."

He thought for a moment, and went on, "Yes, that's the tip. Spread yourself about. Let 'em have it. Show you're not no dud."

Then Tim had leaned back, as the train moved out, feeling very lonely and thinking of Putney and his wife and the little shop. And then . . . And then . . .

The bugle broke in among his thoughts, and he realized with a start where he was. He had been in camp for some weeks.

He disentangled himself from his blankets, pulled his socks and trousers on, and went out of the hut across a patch of grass to the wash-house. He washed and shaved, and

tried to part his close-cropped hair. "Force of habit," he muttered. He returned to the hut to find some thirty men in various stages of dressing. He folded his blankets in the regulation way, and swept under his bed-boards and round the trestles, brushing the dust and bits of straw towards the middle of the floor, ready for the hut-orderly to clear away.

"Pretty chilly," he said to the man next to him.

"Crooil."

Then someone told him he wouldn't need his puttees for physical drill. He was annoyed at having forgotten, and started to unwind them. He had just finished when the mess-orderly deposited a dixie of tea in the middle of the hut. While they were drinking tea out of thick mugs there was a whistle and a shout of "Fall in!" The usual parade followed. Tim had passed through the various stages of squad drill, and had been drafted to his Company.

These were days of constant development for Tim. He was losing his self-consciousness, his movements were cleaner, even his speech was changing. There had been bad moments; moments when physical weariness seemed almost insupportable. Once or twice he underwent the kind of ordeal that makes

a sensitive man squirm; there was the day when a musketry instructor pointed out to the whole "squad" that Private Himrick was trying to fire his rifle with the safety catch "on." But he soon learned that the instructors knew it was a bad thing to be sarcastic with a nervous man. They hustled the slackers relentlessly, and helped the rest. Everybody helped someone. For these were the days when a whole Army was learning, officers and men. Tim the soldier was gradually being evolved. His feet lost their soreness, his pack straps ceased to cut into his shoulders, and after the first few weeks he only made one big blunder. He forgot how to fix bayonets. He became flurried, and then paralysed.

"Didn't half get chewed up," he said afterwards. "Just couldn't move my hands, not a blinking inch."

The routine lost its strangeness. He began to know just what time to allot to each duty. The rifle was the last of all his difficulties to be conquered. He could not decide on the right amount of oil to use. Either his bolt was greasy and apt to clog, or else too dry to ensure easy working. The sights, too, worried him.

When parades were over for the day Tim used to walk into the village to look at the

shops, or spend an hour or two in the picture theatre. If he stayed in camp he used to read or write letters in the canteen or the Y.M.C.A. hut. His letters of this period were a puzzle to his wife.

"Slang, that's what it is," she remarked to a friend. "All new words. It's changing him."

But when he came back on week-end leave she would exhibit him proudly, laughing at his thick boots and his browned skin.

"If they haven't done wonders for you," she would say.

He would then ask for an account of the business, and was anxious to know whether Steve was "making good." When she had satisfied him, it was his turn to give her a picture of his daily life.

"Mostly parades," he would answer. "Physical jerks—you know—like the pictures in the Strand Magazine—blokes chucking their arms about, and bending their backs. Bayonet fighting, too, of course. Rushing at sacks, shouting like hell, trying to imagine they're Gerboys. Then, fssssh!—dig it into his fat hide. And on you go, and do it on another, pulling it out scientific like—withdrawing, they call it. Fair stirs you up sometimes. Makes

you feel its real. That's what they call the ' Spirit of the bayonet '."

" Well, you just ought to see him," his wife would say, after he had gone back and she had seen him off at the station.

" Seems to be kind of growing, he does, mind and body."

It was, perhaps, night operations more than anything else that worked for Tim's evolution. He found in them a certain quality, a something that was not in the rest of the training. One particular night stood up in his mind above others. He, like all the men, had been accustomed to laugh at the idea of sham attacks by night, patrol encounters, outpost schemes, marches by the compass. There had been all the usual incidents. Somebody challenges a Colonel in strong language; somebody else gets lost and walks into the enemy; a third falls into a stream. The jester thrives and helps to throw ridicule over the very idea of night operations. So it was long before Tim realized at all the necessity for taking make-believe seriously, that there was a purpose behind futilities. The platitudes of the lecturers somehow had failed to impress him. " Constant practice, that is to make a certain action and a certain method of thought second nature . . . The man

who is accustomed to doing the right thing at the right moment will not lose his head in a crisis . . . It is the habits acquired at home that determine a man's usefulness at the front . . .'' And so on. The condensed wisdom of old non-commissioned officers meant rather more.

'' If you lose your 'ead you'll lose your 'ead,'' fastened itself into his mind, and another saying of a very old soldier : '' What you do in a rough 'ouse, my lad, or in any tight corner, is only what you've made an 'abit o' doin' at 'ome.''

The night that did so much to alter his point of view was a night of wind and rain. Tim and the other men in his hut sat, as many as could crowd together, round a stove, enjoying a few last moments of warmth, wishing that the rain would stop.

'' On parade!''

A Sergeant put his head round the door, letting in a gust of cold air. At the same time a bugle sounded. They took a last puff at pipes and cigarettes, and scrambled into their equipment. They formed up and, after the roll had been called, the Company Commander explained that it was an ideal night for taking things seriously. Somebody muttered there was no fear of not doing that, and was pulled up for talking.

They were to march to a certain place on the map, dig in under fire, and send out patrols to get in touch with another company. The N.C.O.'s were called out and told details, which they were to make known to the men. Tim, in the rear rank, caught mysterious fragments of knowledge. "South of the third 'd' in Duddon." (Duddon's full of "d's," he thought)—no smoking—no talking.

"Duddon," whispered someone, "that's miles away."

The crux of the whole matter was that the precise position of the enemy was unknown.

They marched off in silence, great-coat collars turned up. A small advanced guard went ahead, and another party protected the rear. Connecting files kept them in touch with the main body. Tim found himself in the main body, going up a hill. Presently they came on the dark shapes of woods, and Tim escaped being sent out as a flank-guard. They began to march slower. Overhanging trees increased the darkness. There was a miserable halt for some time. The only sound was rain dripping from trees. Tim made sure that his magazine was charged with blank. Then they moved forward again. He saw a young officer gazing

intently at a luminous compass, and then wistfully at the sky, which bore no stars to help or comfort him. The men were given to understand that at any moment there might be a surprise. After floundering along for a long time they came to rough country, and remembered some hint of downs in the explanation of the scheme. Here they extended, and advanced very slowly across heather. "Halt and dig in," word came down the line. Tim, wondering what had happened to the detached bodies —"Rear-guards and all that," he called them—fitted together his entrenching tool. It did not take him long to discover that the ground was all roots and brambles, that his hands were numb and his feet and knees cold and damp. Also, water was dripping accurately from his cap down his neck, and he cursed night operations in general, and this one in particular.

A reconnoitring patrol was sent out to investigate a small copse on the left. A screen was sent out to lie down in front of the men who were digging in, to act as protection for them in case of surprise. Presently there was a sound of firing from the copse. The patrol was in touch with the enemy.

And about this time the extraordinary

thing happened to Tim. It may have been the misery of the wet and cold or the sound of firing or the general idea of being on a "blasted heath," as someone called it, at dead of night; one or all of these made him strike out on a new line of thought. For the first time he knew that what was happening now might be happening in a sense far more real in France soon. It did not require much imagination to think that there were no huts and no cocoa to go back to. And there would be artillery and real bullets . . . Real bullets. He got almost a shock at having ever played the fool over training. After that he dug desperately, and, when firing broke out in front, redoubled his efforts. He wanted to get his bit of trench deeper. He wanted to be able to get down properly into it, just to satisfy himself that he could do it if there were real bullets in the air.

When they marched back, soaked to the skin and amazingly tired, he was still in the first glamour of his discovery. He saw how discipline is made out of lonely hours on sentry in the cold and of interminable marches.

The cocoa was very welcome, but looking at his bed and contemplating warm blankets, Tim felt that something vital had been taken

away. He wondered what it would feel like to have nowhere to return.

He learnt about that later, when he bivouaced on Salisbury Plain with his Division.

The history of Tim on Salisbury Plain is the history of many thousands of men. It is a tale of energetic training beyond anything he had known before; of forced marches and long night marches; of manœuvres that lasted two or three days. Tim had his first taste of the " real thing." He slept or tried to sleep, in a wet field, with only his waterproof sheet between his body and the ground, and for a long time afterwards he was to remember what manner of thing a cold night in the open is. He lay between sleeping and waking, his knees drawn up almost to his head, wondering how he could escape rheumatic fever. Dawn found him shivering, trying to clean his rifle with numbed fingers. The same dawn brought him his first friend. He looked up from his rifle and saw next to him a man breathing on his fingers. The man had red hair and very sensitive lips. And they both smiled. Then they chafed each other's hands, and the man with the red hair gave Tim a cigarette. That was the whole incident.

In due course came vaccination and inoculation, and identity discs. The musketry tests were fired, there was a final medical examination, and Tim found himself due for his " draft " leave.

" It's the last leave, Meg," he said to his wife.

" Oh, Tim!" said his wife, and her eyes clouded.

Tim went close to her, and touched her hair.

" You didn't surely think, dear, you didn't surely think I was going to stop this side for duration?"

" Perhaps I didn't think at all, Tim. Women don't like to look ahead much now."

It was a trying time for both of them. Each was afraid of little impulsive tendernesses. They had to choose topics of conversation so carefully. There was so much to be avoided. Somehow it wasn't natural to ignore the situation. That made them think of it more. And yet it certainly wasn't right to harp on it and be too cheerful. It was all very difficult, and both of them wished secretly that it might be over quickly. There was a memorable last afternoon together. They went, slowly up Putney Hill, and the autumn of the trees closed over them and hid them from sight.

They walked, I imagine, a long way. One wonders whether they talked or were silent. Yet there must have been long silences, for they were silent when they came back. Twilight had fallen, and lights came up to meet them. They found a tea-shop, and sat opposite to each other, not troubling to notice the people round them, and both made a great show of eating cakes. They laughed at the most absurd remarks and the most trivial incidents. Somebody dropped a bun. That was something to talk about. After tea, homewards, and Tim went into a shop in the High Street, and insisted on buying Meg a hat that she had admired.

"That grey thing in the window," he said to an amused girl. "Kind of looped up at the side."

"Women like clothes," he said to himself. "It may help to keep her cheery."

And Meg was saying quietly, deep in her heart, "A hat. I wanted it so much before. What does it matter now?"

Time was ending for her. Surely there could be nothing after to-night, when Tim had gone. Just great stretches of darkness, ever so much blacker than night, lit, perhaps, by little white hastily scribbled letters.

They walked home. Tim kept looking at the clock, and sucking at his empty pipe.

"Well—," he said, and paused.

"Time?"

"Think so."

"Got everything?"

"Yes, dear."

"Well, goodbye, Tim. Shall I come to the station?"

"I wouldn't, Meg. Crush, and all that, you know, and—."

"Right. Mind you write whenever you can."

"Don't you worry, Meg. Leave one day."

"Rather."

Then they held each other very close, and before Meg had lost the sense of his arms about her a door banged. It was like the sound of the world ending.

CHAPTER II.

THE GATES OF ADVENTURE.

Tim, like most young soldiers, had had his dreams of a romantic departure from England. If one could not "ride out" to battle like a knight, there were at any rate bands; people could cheer. He remembered old pictures of troops going to the Boer War. Going to war surely demanded something dramatic. So that what actually happened was a surprise to him. There was no excitement and no glamour, and Tim did not look deep enough to find the romance of it. Perhaps none of us will know the romance of it until we are old, and can look back.

"Doesn't seem like going to war," he said when, after travelling through the night, the draft detrained at Folkestone. The short march from the platform on to the quay relieved the stiffness in his legs. An officer

with blue tabs was waiting beside the boat, and before Tim could appreciate the full significance of the moment, his feet had left England. He walked up the gang-plank with his rifle slung, and joined a group on the lower deck, and watched sentries being told off to stand over the boats. He took his pack off and fitted a cumbersome life-belt round his chest. The siren hooted and a sailor shouted something.

"We're off," said the red-haired man at Tim's side.

"We're off right enough, Ginger," said Tim. He felt the inadequacy of the phrase.

The boat began to move, and Tim, crossing the threshold of Adventure, laughed as men will at a psychological moment.

"Doesn't seem a bit like going to war," he repeated, and he was thinking "Putney . . . Shave, sir!"

"Coo!" he said, presently, "Fancy this!"

He watched sunlight falling in a ribbon across a field near the cliffs. A cart was going slowly along a road. The horse looked like a small insect.

"I suppose all that'll go on," he said.

"There goes Blighty," said Ginger. "Oh, well!"

"Ever been across before, Ginger?" asked Tim.

"Yes, once. Not bad. Week-end trip, before the war. Strange not hearing English. The men wave their hands about a lot, and the women dress a treat. 'Chick' they call 'em. You can buy stylish ties, too, all colours, like cricket clubs have, and fancy shirts, and there's sugary cakes and chocolatey ones in the tea-shops."

Low-flying gulls wheeled overhead, and wind and water sang. On each side of the boat a T.B.D., acting as convoy, ploughed the water into white furrows. Ginger remembered his first view of France. Little black dots on the yellow sand, and then shapes and colours emerging slowly. He expected it would be different now.

Tim sat down on his pack, unfolded a magazine, and looked at the pictures. He read a story all about a man who had just married when war broke out, and went to France and was killed, and how his wife received the news. Tim did not finish the story. When he looked up France was quite near, and he could see an empty beach.

"Quick work," said Tim, and struggled into his pack.

"Queer business," said Ginger. "Last time I came, the time I was telling you about, I was with my wife and kid. Four years ago. He was only five."

They glided into the open mouth of the harbour, between deserted quays. Two British officers on crutches watched the boat. A French soldier stood near them, and a few women and small girls with baskets of fruit on their arms.

"Used to be crammed with fashionable folk," said Ginger. "Watching the boat come in, you know."

They clambered down the gang-plank and formed up on the cobbles, keeping separate from the drafts going to other regiments. There was a small demonstration among a group of women, for khaki in these days was not quite the familiar sight it has since become. The officers talked with some staff officers for a few minutes, and the men stood easy. Then they marched off across a bridge and up a long, steep, winding hill to a rest camp. There was a Y.M.C.A. hut there, hot food, and many dialects.

"Hullo, Will!" said Tim to a lanky gunner.

"Hullo, Himrick! Give us a shave?"

"No fear," said Tim, and then, rather self-consciously, "Na poo, chum."

That night in his tent Tim crouched on his blankets and wrote, by the light of a stump of candle, his first field post-card. It said that he was well and that a letter followed

at the first opportunity. When he blew his candle out he could not sleep for some time. "And I was a barber," kept bobbing up in his thoughts, like a refrain. "Can't seem to realize things. France. France. And I was a barber—in Putney. A barber. And I was—Coo! . . . "

Early the next morning before it was light they marched down from the rest camp to a wayside station outside the suburbs of the town. After sitting on their packs for some time they were put into cattle trucks. That was the first time they saw the sign: "40 hommes—8 chevaux."

"Wish we were chivorks," said Tim; "they get more room, seems to me. Like being in the Zoo, this is. Wonder what time they feed us."

Each truck had a sliding door on rollers, at each side of the carriage. Round these openings the men crowded, determined to get as much air as possible and to see something of the country. The train travelled slowly, and frequently stopped altogether at sidings and unimportant stations. The country was flat and very rarely attractive. Occasionally there was a wooded hill or a picturesque village. Many of the villages seemed to have been dropped by a negligent hand into a hollow, to lie there undisturbed.

Each one had a church, with a spire rising high above the other houses, as though guarding the dignity of its flock. There were peaceful farms, and women at work in the fields, who looked up as they passed and sometimes waved their hands. Red scarves round their heads made a blotch of colour in the monotonous scene. Sometimes the train passed barns where soldiers were billeted. Groups of soldiers loitered at doors, reading newspapers or cleaning equipment. Once they went by a town. One could see shops and the life of the streets; here and there a man in dark civilian clothes, or a well-dressed woman.

All day they travelled, from time to time eating bully-beef and biscuits and milk-chocolate, and towards evening faint orange-blossoms of light flowered in the distance, to right and left. The men began to sing favourite songs. And then suddenly they passed an old trench and rusting wire.

"War," said Ginger.

"Probably just a practice one," said Tim.

Soon after this they stopped at a bigger station than usual. The name stirred a memory.

"Hazebrouck, Hazebrouck . . . Seen it somewhere."

They left the station, and someone shouted

to a woman who was going home through the fields:

"Hi! La guerre?"

She jerked her thumb forwards and stopped to look at the train.

"Oui, la guerre là-bas," she said. "No bon, la guerre. Compris?"

Rain began to beat against the trucks. The rattling train came to a halt, a final halt this time, and they detrained at a toy station. They marched along a muddy lane, through a lifeless village, until barns loomed up before them. The Battalion Quartermaster allotted them to their billets, and Tim found himself with Ginger among strange faces, in a big loft. He secured a heap of dry straw, as far from the door as possible, and deposited his pack.

"Just out, chum?" asked a young Lance-corporal.

"Yes. Yesterday. Where are we?"

"Back resting. 'Bout twelve miles back. We go in again day after to-morrow. Reckon you've clicked, mate."

"Suppose I have," said Tim, and smiled.

Tim wrote another field post-card. Someone was snoring loudly near him. All that was visible of the sleeper was a curly, close-cropped head of hair. The rest was hidden under a heap of blankets.

"Must be a lazy beggar," said Tim.

"Him, lazy?" said the man opposite to him. "He may look it, but when there's anything doing . . . That's Curly."

He said "That's Curly," with an air of explaining many mysteries.

Tim went on with his preparations for the night.

His dreams were incoherent that night. Little bits of Putney stole into them: very vivid pictures.

The next morning there was physical drill in a field behind the barns, and after that Company drill. In the afternoon they had a route march and heard for the first time a grumbling of guns in the distance, like the muffled sound of traffic heard from the centre of Kensington Gardens. In the evening Tim wrote home. He told his wife that he was to move up towards the line the next day, that he was comfortable so far, and that it seemed a very long time already since he had left her.

"My letters," he wrote, "won't be able to tell you much after this, because things get censored, you know. Nearly everything gets cut out, the fellows say."

Next day, early, the Battalion formed up and marched away from the village. Tim's impressions of the march stood out against a

background of cobbles, endless cobbles greasy with mud. There were straight roads between lines of poplars, columns of lorries, an A.S.C. park, a big village or two with a Divisional Canteen. There was a halt by the side of a ditch for a meal, and while they were eating British aeroplanes droned high up, going towards the sound of the guns. In the afternoon they came to a town, and the Battalion was distributed over a tobacco factory. Tim went out and walked about the busy streets. He and Ginger had a big omelette and cups of cocoa at a shop down a side street. In the window it bore a sign that made them laugh. "CHIPS" was the sign, and the girl inside insisted on serving chips with the omelettes. They felt that she knew better than they what soldiers ought to eat. After the meal they went again into the streets, which were crowded with officers and men. There were shops and plenty of lights. Some of the windows were quite gaily decked, and up and down one heard the Oxford drawl, the broad vowels of Northern England, the burr of Gloucestershire, the lazy speech of the South, Cockney twang, Australian twang, Welsh vehemence, the musical Scottish dialects, and Irish brogue. Through open doors and windows there came gusts of laughter and singing.

They wandered back to the tobacco factory, very sleepy, and lay down on the floor with a contented sigh, heads pillowed on packs.

The march was resumed in the morning with an interval between Companies, and on the outskirts of the town Tim saw a crumbling house. There were rents in the roof that gaped up at the sky, and a heap of masonry lay all round what had once been a massive stone building. It came as something of a shock to Tim. He felt as though an arm had shot out and grasped him, directing his attention to the maimed house. "I've got you now," the owner of the arm might have said. "You can't escape. You're coming towards me. Nearer. . . nearer . . . "

They crested a small hill, and two girls standing in the doorway of an Estaminet waved and shouted "Bon voyage!" Further on they passed the transport of a Battalion which was out of the line, and then going through another village, turned abruptly to the left. They halted and watched a column of men coming down the road. These were caked in mud from head to foot. They were the colour of mud, even hands and faces, and most of them were smoking, their caps thrust back. Tim realized with awe that these were men who perhaps only

a day ago had been within a hundred yards of the Germans. It seemed very wonderful to him—then, that line of men marching back. It was to become a commonplace of his existence.

A whistle blew and they fell in and moved off, and soon Tim saw his first German shell burst. It landed in a field by the roadside some hundreds of yards away, and sent up a black writhing mass of smoke. Feeling that something ought to be said, he said, rather loudly.

"Well, that isn't much."

"Wait till you see the 'ole it made, me old brown son," said a man two away from him. He recognised the man who was called Curly, and was attracted at once by a humorous twinkling in his eyes.

"That's what them things does," said Curly presently, and pointed to a big hole at the side of the road. There was another near it, in a field. The size of those holes appalled Tim.

"See the scorched grass, son? Well that's 'ow you can tell whether its fresh or not."

Tim smiled.

"That one must be pretty fresh," he said.

"Probably an hour or two. Like as not they've been 'aving a do at this old road.

Often 'appens."

Suddenly there was an ear-splitting noise close at hand. Tim felt his heart leap up, up, up, into his very throat. He saw Ginger's head go round as if dragged by the jerk of a rope. One or two other men ducked. There was a general laugh, and it was explained that a British battery was firing among some ruined houses. Tim looked at the houses, and it was his first glimpse of utter desolation and destruction. They were simply heaps of brick and stone with the framework of roofs, all huddling together, with nothing near them but flat, dead fields pitted with holes, and lacerated trees. Far ahead a vast mass stood up. It was the slag-heaps, he was told.

Impressions were crowding into his mind too quickly. He seemed to have gone in one moment from security and civilization into the heart of the war. Before he had finished looking at the ruins, he heard a clattering ahead of him, high up. Black and white puffs were bursting and floating idly. These were like bubbles blown suddenly by some magician. Later on he made out two aeroplanes, some way apart. He was told that the one round which the black smoke lingered was a British one.

They came, under the shadow of the slag-

heaps, to a village that seemed at first to have no inhabitants. There were so few houses in which anyone could live. It was only later that Tim discovered a few shops, still doggedly carrying on a trade in chocolate and fruit, their window-frames either sand-bagged or filled with boarding and brown paper. Here the order came back for Companies to put an interval between each Platoon, and a little further on Tim's Platoon was halted. He found himself condemned to pass the night in a kind of cellar, under a house that had been practically shot to pieces. The floor was uneven with rubble, but he and Ginger managed to find some sacking to lie on. While they were arranging their "beds" they heard a familiar snoring, and looking round saw Curly asleep in the corner. He had thrown his pack off and huddled himself up in a ball.

"Well I'm damned," said Tim. "Look at that."

"P'raps we'll be like that one day," said Ginger.

"Who knows?"

Before they turned in that night the two of them walked down the village to a canteen they had heard about. They found it at the far end of the village, and there, in company with several gunners and infantrymen, they

drank tea and smoked cheap cheroots. Tim felt very like a veteran that evening, until the big man in the corner told his story.

* * * * *

"When we was pressed back," he said, "we got into a sort of a kind of a trench. It was narrow, and not very deep in most places, so we had to set to work to build it up. There was plenty of sandbags lying about in the bottom of the trench and behind the parados, so we got on to pounding some on 'em into shape, and filling others. We knew we hadn't much time, so we worked till the sweat ran off us. We was bathed in it. We forgot all about being tired or shaken, and, mind you, we'd been under fire pretty well all the time we was coming back. Withdrawing under fire isn't very pleasant. You keep wanting to go quicker, but you know if you do you'll throw everything out of order, like; also you know you've got to keep your strength, as it might be. We felt they was comin' on our tracks hell for leather; and when we got to the trench we didn't half put our backs into it.

Well, after a bit, when we'd got the old trench ship-shape and was thinking about resting a couple o' minutes, what should the blighters do but attack again! Heaps of 'em; advancing in reg'lar lumps and bundles;

just looked like a gray wall, kind of. We got up on the firesteps and prepared to give 'em a good reception, you can bet. We was tired, but we wasn't in no mood for giving 'em best without a devil of a scrap. We fired into the blighters, and the old Lewis guns got going. We could see the gaps in their waves, and it bucked us up a lot. They got up to our wire and scrambled through it, and we knew it was time to pull ourselves together.

We gripped our rifles tighter, and in another minute they was on us. I stood well back to receive a young-looking chap who was just goin' to spring. Next second a slice of the parapet heaved in, and several of us was rolling about, trying to get on our feet again, Gerboys and us, all mixed up. There was a dead weight on one of my legs, and I saw someone struggling to get up. I tried to get a proper grip of my rifle to swing the butt down on him. It was a Ger all right. He seemed to know what my game was, and he shot out his hand and collared me by the throat. I felt his nails tearing the skin, and I loosed out with my left hand at his head. But I only barked my knuckles on somebody's helmet.

After that, Gawd only knows what happened. You don't get much time for

noticing in them sort of rough houses. It's only afterwards, a good while afterwards, that little things, little incidents, like, come back to you, and you're surprised to find you've forgotten 'em. I remember there was a real mad face next to me once, glaring at me and right through me; wild it was, and the lips were drawn tight back, so as I could see his gums. Then something came in between. I saw a chap, too, in a corner where a traverse had blown in, swinging his rifle round 'im like a ruddy whirlwind, and there was three Jerries waiting for 'im to get tired and chuck it. Later on I got a great knock on the head from something, and I remember having a quaint feelin' that I'd been smashed in half. The pain went right through me, out at my chest. And there was a chap blaspheming like 'ell in the bottom of the trench. He tried to bite at my ankle. About that time I was a bit blind. My eyelashes was glued down. I thought it was sweat at first, trickling from my head; but it wasn't. No, it wasn't sweat.

There was things happened, I tell you, in that trench, that a fellow can't speak about, and daren't even think about. It was just like a lot of wild animals let loose after a long starving, like something in one of those jungles that smells blood. Fellows don't

know what they're up to at a time like that. Blokes who collected stamps and caterpillars, sort of coves that was frightened to pat a bull-dog, why they do things that beat anything the old highwayman chaps and smugglers do in the story-books.

All I know is we drove 'em out after some time, and we had a bit of a breathing space to look at each other, and at the trench. Some of us was pretty badly hit, and the reaction is cruel after a fight like that. You don't notice things at the time, but after—well, I reckon it's like a cross-country race. After you've got your second wind, you don't notice you're tired till you stop and sit down. Then, when you get up again, you realize how you feel. It was about that time that I discovered that it wasn't sweat that blinded me, and another thing I discovered, too, something that made everything seem a wash-out. My water-bottle was leaking. And, would you believe it, I hadn't noticed that before?"

* * * * *

"Who's that?" said Tim, when the story was over.

"That's Blades. 'E's a great one for yarns. Find 'im 'ere most any night when 'is crowd's out of the line."

That night Tim lay thinking of the story he had heard and listening to the guns. During the walk back from the canteen he had seen flares far ahead and flashes, and all these things gave him plenty to think about.

"We've got guns pretty near this 'ouse," said a man beside him.

And Tim was thinking—"If that noise makes me feel like this, what about the front line? And how about being where those things are bursting? Suppose you get into it," he said to himself. He looked at the sleepers round him. In between the voices of the guns all was quiet, broken only by snoring.

"Putney," he said suddenly, sitting up in the dark. "Putney, and—and THIS. Coo! If Meg could see me now. Meg, and Steve."

On that he fell asleep, and while he slept a rat crept out to investigate.

CHAPTER III.

TIM IS INITIATED.

"Going into the line." Tim had read the phrase and heard it spoken so often. It seemed so simple, just a matter of marching somewhere. And now the phrase applied to him.

The men spent the early part of the morning in cleaning their rifles and having them inspected. After that they were free to walk about or do pretty much as they pleased. Most of them had a farewell meal in an Estaminet. Curly lay down to sleep. Ginger and Tim sat down to write home, and Tim wrote :—

"My dearest Meg,

I've just got a bit of time to write to you before going up to the trenches. Yes, I'm really going up there now, and I may not get a chance of writing much for a while. You'll understand. I've

been thinking a lot about you and hoping you wont go and let yourself get too lonely, I mean why not have Minnie in some nights and have a bit of music, something like that. It sounds a funny thing to say but I'm lonely too, although there are so many men here. I suppose I'll get used to it all. It's a quiet bit of the line we're going into just for a start. I like the chaps in my Section. One of them is a reglar old soldier, always sleeping. Well, I must end now. God bless you, Meg.

Your loving husband,

TIM."

He addressed it carefully, and gave it to his Section Commander when the letters were collected. Then he and Ginger went off to look about them. It was a mournful sight to see so many houses ruined beyond repair, and they wondered where all the families were who had lived in them. Some of them might have been killed in their homes. Perhaps that was better than being exiled. They walked out towards the slag-heaps, and on their way back watched a battery doing a shoot. Peasants, quite unperturbed, were working close to the guns. They stopped and listened to the whistle of the shells as they sped over towards the German line, and

Tim had a picture in his mind of the shell bursting among men, coming suddenly with a whine and catching them unawares.

"It's a cruel game," he said. "Seems senseless."

"It's cruel right enough."

"You're a silent kind of chap, you know, Ginger. Don't often speak much. Anything on your mind?"

Ginger turned and looked at him, and for the first time Tim noticed the shadows under his eyes.

"Don't you sleep, mate?"

"Yes," said Ginger, "I sleep. Nothing wrong with me. Just a bit strange, that's all."

They went back to their billet, and found the dinners already "up." After the meal they tried to sleep a little; but the order to clean up billets and get ready to move off disturbed them. And Tim began again to wonder what it would be like. He had a kind of feeling that between this world he was in now and that other world of war a veil was drawn. Presently he would lift it and pass beyond.

They started off with intervals between sections just before twilight. It was raining, and there were dirty-looking shapeless clouds in the sky. Waiting outside the billet, ready

to move, Tim heard the water gurgling along over the cobbles at the side of the village street. The Adjutant came by, the rain dripping from his cap. Close at hand a Sergeant was telling off a Platoon. Tim could hear the squelch of boots in mud and water when the men formed fours.

The word was given and they started.

It was details that Tim noticed most. The broader impressions come in retrospect. What he was most vividly aware of was the nerve-strain of avoiding shell-holes and pit-falls where the lorries had been. Darkness and mud. Once a feeling of perfect security came to him. All the shells were going by so high overhead.

A tottering wall bore in black letters "ESTAM." The rest was obliterated. Lines of poplars on either side of the road, lopped and torn, converged in darkness. Behind in the villages there was a sound of singing. Away to the left German shells were searching a road. The shells came singing lazily through the air. Tim soon knew them as "crumps," and recognized their gigantic cough.

Progress grew slower. The darkness was stabbed by flashes of light, jagged edges of fire. The country ahead seemed to be trembling, and again Tim had that idea of

the veil. At this moment, perhaps, he was lifting it. Already it might have dropped again behind him, shutting out the world he knew. Flares, lingering in the air, revealed for a few seconds chipped walls, bits of wire, tracks that disappeared in mud and torn ground. It reminded Tim of a play he had seen at Drury Lane. The stage lightning had played intermittently over a barren tract of wild country. The chattering of machine guns could be distinguished. They came on pits full of greenish water, and sometimes old rifles or equipment. Sometimes they stumbled on shell-cases. A clump of trees, caught by a gun-flash, stood out weird and maimed for a second. They heard a gunner officer shouting.

Darkness and mud gave place to noise and mud.

"Step short in front," said a voice. And word came back "Keep up in rear."

Tim began to feel the rain when they halted at Brigade Headquarters for guides. His knees were wet and cold, and his coat-sleeves, at the wrist. He had to keep wiping the water from his chin to prevent it gathering and trickling down inside his collar, over his throat and down his neck.

They went on again with the guides in front, and could hear occasional rifle-shots

and bursts of machine gun fire. There were no longer cobbles. Tim felt grass under his feet. It became more difficult to keep his balance. Sometimes he slipped and slithered a foot or two. "Hole, right," was whispered, and he saw the men in front step, one by one, warily to one side. A dim bulk ahead puzzled Tim. The grass ended, and he slid down rough steps. Slimy walls rose up on either hand, and he knew that the trenches had begun. He floundered from right to left, from left to right, shooting out a hand to keep his balance, and watching intently the pack of the man in front. It would not be pleasant to lose touch. Men began to curse and blaspheme. Tim cursed. He cursed the rain and his pack and the war and the man in front. Cold water was over his ankles. And then, suddenly, duckboards began. They had a habit of tilting up at one end, or of sinking under the water.

Presently he was aware of dim figures sitting in the mud. The glow of cigarettes lit up unshaved faces. "Support line," said someone.

"How far to the front line?"

"Ten or twelve miles, an' a lake or two. Keep your pecker up. Stick it, Nobbler."

"Got your winter underclothes, 'Arry?"

"Look at old Noah 'untin' for his blasted ark."

"Wotcher, Titch! 'Ow's the war?"

Tim struggled on. A German shell burst behind the parados. Mud rained over him, and a piece of shrapnel fell at his feet.

"Souvenir," said Tim.

But he was shaken. All his sense of security had gone.

"Musn't seem to mind," he said to himself.

The noise increased.

"Getting warm, isn't it?" he asked.

"Warm!" said Curly, turning his head and speaking over his shoulder. "Warm! This 'ere's bloody ping-pong. That's what this is."

Tim wanted to know all there was to know. He wanted to find out just how bad it could be. He wanted it settled, dreading surprises. He wished he could get all the new sensations over, see all the terrible sights. He tried to find the adventure in it, and the romance. He smiled at a queer thought. "I'm one of the chaps the music-hall girls sing about at home. Yes, I am, now."

Then, once more, his thoughts became concentrated on watching the man in front. "Step wide," word came back. Tim stepped too wide.

Spht! Wet earth struck his cheek. A bullet went by with a sound like a scythe cutting something very cleanly. It was followed by another that sounded like the taut string of a violin touched sharply.

"Front line." Tim halted and blinked at a world of sodden sandbags. A sentry, in one of the newly-invented tin helmets, crouched on a firestep. Down the steps of a dug-out there was the cheery glow of a brazier.

"'Ome at last," said Curly, "'Ome, sweet ruddy 'ome."

That night, later, Tim found himself perched on the firestep, looking cautiously into the darkness, wondering what the Germans were doing and what they looked like. He had a faint resentment against them for hiding. He was very conscious, too, of the discomfort of his helmet. His loaded rifle was in his hand, and he thought he would like to try it. He wondered if he could really pull the trigger when it came to killing a man.

"Killing," he said. "Fancy killing people—and me a barber. Coo!"

It was a night that Tim will not forget. It seemed endless. The wet and the cold and the hunger were so intense that little heed could be given to danger. The hour of

sentry-go was perhaps the worst of all. Twice that night he endured it, and the chill wind blew right into his bones, and carried the rain with it. His clothes were soaked through and through, and he recalled that old night on the Downs, and, later on, the bivouacing on Salisbury Plain.

"Got my wish this time," he said when he was relieved, "and no mistake. Nowhere to go back to. No hot cocoa."

Ginger came along the trench.

"Trying to get warm," he said, and grinned.

"Try and get some sleep, mate," said Tim.

"Make way!" a voice shouted, and Tim and Ginger turned to see a stretcher being carried down the trench. A blanket was thrown over something that groaned. A mass of white bandage protruded at the top, and there was a wet, dark stain spreading over it.

Tim felt violent physical sickness.

"'E's gorn," said a stretcher bearer. "They're comin' over pretty thick up yonder."

Tim turned to light a cigarette to steady his nerves. When he looked round again the stretcher had vanished round a traverse. But Ginger was still looking, staring the way

it had gone. His face was pale under its coating of dirt. He passed his tongue over his lips.

"My God!" he said.

Tim put a hand on his shoulder.

"Rotten at first," he said. "Got to see it some time."

"Wonder if he was married," said Ginger.

"Doesn't do, mate," said Tim, "To think that way out here."

And somehow, as he spoke, the knowledge of his friend's weakness gave him the strength he had thought he lacked.

"Have a fag, Ginger, and let's walk up and down a bit."

Dawn found them hungry and cold and tired.

"It's a hell of a strain," said Tim, as they stood to.

When "Stand down" had passed from man to man they cleaned their rifles, and then there was breakfast. Tim cooked a dirty-looking bit of bacon in the lid of his mess-tin. When it was ready he prepared a thick bacon sandwich, and finished up the meal with bread and jam and a mug of cinder-coloured tea. After that he crept into a slimy shelter, a miniature dug-out, and fell asleep almost as soon as he had laid

himself down. It was a deep dreamless sleep of exhaustion, out of which he was roused to be instructed in the art of cleaning duck-boards. The rain had stopped. Some of the men were filling sandbags. Others were rebuilding portions of the parapet. One or two were still sleeping. These had rigged up their waterproof sheets as shelter from the weather. Tim spent the next hour in levering boards out of the mud, while another man scraped them with a spade. The mud stank, and Tim smoked all the time. It was during this work that he experienced his first whizz-bang. He thought it more unpleasant than the big shells, but that was because he had not yet seen what the big shells can do. There was a short sharp rushing sound, and a venomous spit of an explosion. "Whizz-bang," said Curly, seeing Tim's startled and surprised eyes. Others followed, like angry little giants pouncing down on a prey. The man who was scraping Tim's boards uttered an exclamation, and Curly, hearing him, followed his gaze. Then he came over to Tim and touched his arm.

"Best not show that wood over the top, son. They've seen it. If they wasn't 'ell's worst shots they'd 'ave 'ad you done in."

Tim lowered the board, feeling very foolish and callow.

"Better shift on a bit now," said Curly. "They'll go on 'avin a try at this bay.

Tim moved into another bay, and, sure enough, for some time whizz-bangs continued to hiss down all round the one he had left.

During Tim's next hour on sentry, the Company Commander came round with the Platoon Commander.

"Himrick, sir," said the Platoon Commander.

"Just out?" said Tim's Captain.

"Yes, sir."

"Feeling strange, I suppose?"

"I do rather, sir."

"You'll soon get the idea of things."

"Hope so, sir."

"Where are Company Headquarters?"

Tim explained where they were.

"And Battalion Headquarters?"

Again Tim explained.

"And the stretcher-bearers' dug-out?"

Again Tim repeated what his Section Commander had told him. The officers passed on, telling him to be sure to keep a good look-out.

Curly came up to him.

"Keep your nob low, son. There's a sniper got that corner taped a fair treat.

'E 'as a go most days, some time or other."

"Thanks," said Tim. "It's damned good of you to give me bits of hints."

"Gawdstruth!" said Curly. "You 'ave to learn orf of someone. Remember when I 'ad to learn myself."

Tim, looking through the periscope, saw a stretch of very untidy ground, and then tangled wire, and just beyond it a tumbled bastion of earth and sandbags which he realised hid the Germans. He reckoned it was about ninety yards away.

"No fear of bombs," he thought.

Soon after he had been relieved he saw something black whirling high into the air. It seemed almost to pause, and then to swoop down suddenly. At the same time there was a shout beside him.

"Minnie, right!"

One or two men scampered to the left. There was a dull thud, rather like the sound of the flat of a hand laid heavily on wet earth, then a moment of silence, followed by a tearing, rending explosion. A cataract of earth hailed down on the sandbags. Some of it went down Tim's neck.

"Mighty unpleasant things, aren't they?" he said.

"Best to be out when they call," said Curly. "Think I'll go an' get a bit o' sleep."

In the afternoon Tim was told he was on the ration party, and towards nightfall two men from each Platoon, carrying sandbags, went down the trench to draw the rations and the letters. A party of four water-carriers, with petrol tins hitched together in couples and swung over their shoulders, brought up the rear. There was a supplementary man for the officers' rations. Tim found himself in the rear with two petrol tins, and as he marched off he heard Curly's voice.

"There goes Rebecca to the bloomin' well," said Curly.

The party went down a communication trench bearing, on a board in black letters, VILLIERS STREET. A pioneer Battalion was at work here. It was cold, and a chill wind made the party glad of the exercise. It was also regarded as a welcome change from the monotony of trench routine. One had a chance of seeing some sign of the other world. Tim was very anxious to assure himself that that other world was still going on. He wanted to know that it was possible for him to go back again, to lift that veil. Want of sleep and the strain on his nerves had already affected him, so that when presently the party came out on to a track, leaving the trenches behind, there were tears behind his eyes that gave a burning and aching

sensation. Novels, telling of such things, have perhaps made them seem ridiculous. But they happen. A few stumps of trees, and a twittering of birds were to him like some echo of a life there had been very long ago, before he had come to the war. Going in single file, they passed a broken iron gate, and a large heap of bricks and rubble. There were withered boughs on the ground, and Tim had a vision of a garden gay with flowers. Children may have played there.

The ration dump was near a forlorn church, through the roof of which a big shell had passed. The massive door was off its hinges, and through the opening one saw powdered masonry and a statue of the Virgin that stood up proudly amid the ruin. A red-faced Quartermaster-Sergeant smoking a briar pipe met them at the dump. He and the Corporal in charge of the party exchanged talk, which was punctuated by the deep voices of batteries.

"Anything on up there?" asked the Quartermaster-Sergeant.

"No. Pretty quiet," said the Corporal.

The men opened their sandbags, and the rations were doled out. Tim and the three other water-carriers went further on to fill their cans. They came to a house that stood by itself, and behind it, among fragments

of shutters and roof-slates, there was a wheezing pump. Here they filled the cans and then went back to rejoin the rest. It was now dark, and star-shells were going up over the lines.

"Good deal o' firing on up there now," said one man.

They moved off again in single file up the track, past the old gate and the few broken trees. There were no birds singing now. Almost at the beginning of the communication trench they ran into a party of engineers coming out. They flattened themselves against the trench wall, and the engineers came scraping by.

"What cheer, Lyons and Co?" said the leader.

Tim found it difficult to manipulate his tins of water. One of the stoppers came out and he had to halt to screw it in. That meant falling behind. The rest were up as far as the support line before he caught them. They had halted for a minute and were talking to a couple of men.

"Where's all the row?" said one.

"Reckon its just about round your bit."

Tim listened to the noise of the shells bursting, with an unpleasant idea that there was going to be an attack.

As they drew nearer the front line it was

increasingly evident that their Company was being bombarded.

"Seems we've just clicked for a warm 'alf hour," said the man in front of Tim.

In the front line the sentries were crouching behind the parapet, constantly looking over. A whole fragment of trench had been blown in, and a man had been dug out. Tim saw his face. It was very white beneath the mud, and one arm hung limp by his side. The party deposited their loads. The usual sarcasms greeted their return.

"Fancy only 'altin' 'alf an hour."

"Must 'ave struck a couple o' motors."

"No fear. Aeroplanes."

"Is it strawberry this time?" asked a youngster.

"Yus. An' peaches and cream."

But Tim could not take his eyes off the man who had been buried. He was recalled to the needs of the present by somebody calling out the letters. There was one for Tim.

"THAKE?" said the Corporal. "Thake? Isn't that the red-headed chap? Friend of yours, Himrick?"

"That's it," said Tim, "I'll take it."

He took the letter and his own, and leaving his tins of water set off up the trench

to find Ginger. A terrific concussion ahead of him sang in his ears for some seconds. There was a shout for stretcher-bearers, and Tim came round the traverse to find his way blocked by a mound of earth. All he realized then was that somehow or other he must keep calm. His heart was beating fast, but he said in a clear voice,

"Anyone seen Thake?"

There was silence, and then Tim clambered over the mound, landing almost on top of a body the other side.

"Thake," he said, foolishly, as if to himself, and then "Ginger."

Then he went quite cold all over, and the feeling of physical sickness gripped him. Against the parados Ginger was lying, his lips drawn back exposing his teeth, giving an impression of a hideous grin. There was a hole in the side of his head and a deep cut on the forehead. From his chin down to the collar of his tunic there were only mangled strips and tatters of flesh. His legs were drawn up, and his hands and arms had evidently tried to shield his face. His eyes were terrible. And the blood still oozed.

"Ginger," said Tim. "I was only talking to him a couple of hours ago."

"Copped it proper," said one of the men.

Tim felt a hand on his arm, and turned to find Curly by his side.

"'E's gone West, mate. Best not look. Come down 'ere a minute."

They clambered back over the mound of earth together, and Curly went down on hands and knees, and crawled into a shelter.

"Come in, mate."

Tim followed, feeling like a child.

"Look 'ere," said Curly, when they were both on the ground inside. "Look 'ere, son, I know just 'ow you're feeling. Fit to howl. I bin through it. Just take a tip from an old 'and. Don't never think. Don't never think. There's no good in it when it comes to war. You'll see worse things than this yet. Bags of worse things. Keep doin' something. It's the only way. When you 'aven't got a job, sleep. When you can't sleep, get a job."

"But," said Tim, "you see we were friends. I—well, it seems so queer—suddenly, like that."

"I know, son. It always does. Gawd! The mates I've lost. Seen 'em shot to bloody 'ell. Seen 'em all chawed up. Buried 'em. You just go and get a job on, son. Come and 'elp me."

They crawled out into the trench again, and Curly took him to where some men were building up the parapet. Tim did not seem to notice the shells much then. He was simply unhappy and disgusted. He had pictured such fine ways of dying. As he worked, he said to Curly:

"Seems awful to get done in like that. Just suddenly, unprepared. Not doing anything much."

"Reckon death's allus death," said Curly. "A chap can only do 'is job. If you're killed pattin' a dirty old sandbag, you're doin' your job. An' the bloke what stops one, goin' over the top, 'e's doin' 'is job, same as you. You get on with the work."

CHAPTER IV.

IN BILLETS.

The remainder of that spell in the trenches passed uneventfully. Tim, taking Curly's advice, worked hard at whatever job he could find, and when he was not working tried to sleep. There were no more bombardments like that first one. One or two of the men got slight wounds, and Tim himself had a narrow escape. Once, when he was looking through the periscope, a shell burst over the parapet, and he was knocked off his feet by falling sandbags. It shook his nerve and gave him a headache, but he began to see that all these things are war. He found little time for thinking now, and when he did think he allowed that first letter from his wife to carry him home to Putney. He saw her as she described herself, trying to forget everything in household details, and he found a comforting parallel. He and she both had

to try to forget by working hard. He saw, more and more clearly, that it is no good shutting oneself up alone with one's thoughts. And, later, he realized how much harder was her task. There was nothing much to help her to forget. He had the excitements, the constant action, the friends. She had only a silent house, and long, long hours to fill.

On the morning of the fourth day Tim heard that the Company was to be relieved. His eyes were sore from want of sleep, and he felt that he must rest. He wanted to leave the dirt and the noise behind him. And yet already he was losing the misery of loneliness. Curly and he became inseparables, and the incident (he saw, now, that such things are incidents) of Ginger's death brought him more into the war. It was as if its cold finger had stretched out and touched him, claimed him. He began to see the possibilities of comradeship. "All in the same boat," he said to himself. "All the same," he thought, "from being a barber, to this." Instantly the Putney shop flashed across his mind, a vivid vision. "Coo!" he said.

So the time came for his Company to be relieved. They marched down Windy Way, through the mud and water. Round the

corner they came on firmer duck-boards and a narrower trench with neatly banked-up walls, brown and slimy. Tim could hear his pack scraping the mud, and his sleeves became damp at the elbows. There was the irritation of a rifle sling that kept loosening, and a butt that would knock against his legs. There were parties of men working, scraping boards or digging, oldish men in khaki, with a type of face that brought back London streets and men with gaudy handkerchiefs knotted round their throats, and baggy corduroy trousers. They still spat on their hands before raising pick or spade, and still had their clay pipes.

The traverses became fewer and fewer, and they came up three steps to a muddy track, and Tim saw the trees again and bare fields; further on there was a house or two, and cobbles began. As they went British shells whined by, high overhead. Once on the road a fresh breeze met them, with something clean and pure in it after the atmosphere of the trenches. It spoke of open spaces, brought memories of unspoiled country. Among the first tumble-down cottages of a village little girls in check pinafores met them; insistent little girls who held up baskets, crying "Bouchées, deux sous la pièce. Ap-pells. Véry good."

Following the road they shook off gradually the traces of shells. Undamaged houses met them. In a large field women were at work. Outside a barn some men were improving the entrance to their billet by laying down chipped bricks. Others were emptying rubbish into a big pit. An incinerator smoked away on the left. Along a bypath a party came singing towards the main road. They looked clean, and had towels under their arms. Tim began to think of warm water. He could feel the mud in the pores of his skin, and he realized quite suddenly how very tired he was.

They left the village behind, and, after a halt, turned to the right at a cross-roads. From a patch of rising ground they saw a mass of houses, with the early morning sunlight on a spire. Motor-'buses went by stripped of their advertisements, crowded with men on their way up to the trenches. Tim caught snatches of a song about a girl who was someone's—or everyone's—"Ever-loving honey baby." There was a column of lorries, drawn up at the side of the road, and once a staff car raced by, filling the air with importance. A little boy ran along beside the column, shouting for souvenirs, and somebody gave him a large slab of chocolate.

Tim was glad when the village was reached. His section had a billet to themselves in a small loft. They swilled their faces and necks under a pump in a back-yard, and shaved slowly and luxuriously. Then they lay down, and almost before Tim had settled into his position he heard Curly's familiar snore.

It was towards evening when he woke. He and Curly went out together, and had tea and eggs and rolls in the kitchen of a farmhouse.

Tim's days in billets did much to restore his confidence. His nerves mended, and the sleep did him good. It was only when he thought of Ginger that he became silent. On the afternoon of the second day in billets Tim was summoned to his officer, who said he had heard he was a friend of Ginger's and that it would be appreciated in Ginger's home if he, Tim, were to write a letter to the wife. The officer added that he had written himself and had returned the letter that had come from his wife on the night he was killed. So Tim sat down in the corner of an Estaminet and tried to compose a letter. He tried to say what he hoped people would say to his own wife if he were killed. For the rest of that day he was very quiet and sad.

These were days of talk round kitchen stoves, above all else. When parades were over the men would go in little groups into the farmhouses. There they would drink coffee and talk over many things. Especially they liked to talk of their homes, and the peasants were eager listeners, though understanding few words. There was an old woman in the farmhouse where Tim and Curly used to sit, and while she made omelettes her two daughters would question the men. In this manner Tim found out that Curly was married and had two sons, and that he lived in Camden Town.

"Vous fiancé?" said Therèse to Tim.

"More than that," said Tim, "Spliced—married."

"Ah! Vous marié. Vous avez une photographie de madame? Oui?"

Tim, very self-conscious, produced from a pocket-case a photograph of his wife. He could not gather exactly what they said, but he thought it was nice of them to show an interest in him and his affairs.

"Piccaninny?" said Marie, the elder girl.

"Non," said Tim.

One rainy day the Adjutant sent his gramophone by his orderly to the biggest barn. They played through all the records, and men came in from other billets. They

had an impromptu dance, and then, when the rag-times were finished, they sat very quiet and listened to the music of "L'Arlésienne." In that music Tim lost himself, and, looking up when it was over, caught the eye of a fair man by the door. Someone had told Tim that the man was a poet, and he could not help wondering what visions the poet saw in that music.

That night the fair man was on sentry. A chill wind froze his cheeks. The tips of his ears were intensely cold. Each gust that blew down the lane made the puddles tremble, and ruffled the tall grass over the ditch until it quivered and then swayed. The sentry turned up the ragged collar of his coat, and began to pace to and fro. Presently he stopped at the door of the barn and peered through a chink. He could see men huddled up under their blankets, heads swathed in khaki scarves and woollen helmets, tunics hanging from rusty nails, tins containing candle-ends, perched on the ledge that ran round the wall, packs on the mounded straw. He could hear the breathing of the sleepers, the stertorous snoring of the elder men and the brisk snoring of the younger. Every now and then someone would turn suddenly or mutter in his dreams.

The stars were fading already, and away

to the East the faint beginnings of dawn brought an ashen gray to the sky. Clouds were cold and lifeless. It was the hour when sick people grow worse, when healthy people grow hungry and weak and cold. The sentry began to walk up and down again. The sound of his footsteps seemed to him unnaturally loud. His rifle was slung, and he gripped it by the sling.

Almost imperceptibly there came into the sky a hint of returning life, a warmth, as the colour comes back into bloodless cheeks. The light grew. A glow of orange and shadowy red tipped a jagged cloud-edge above some trees. Birds woke. There was a stirring of wings, a fluttering, and fragmentary song. The light and colour spread, warm fingers stretching out into the cold spaces of sky. Gray deserts blossomed.

A window in a farmhouse, facing East, burst into sudden flame, flashed, glittered. There were jewels of light in puddles, and a tremulous ribbon of orange floated on the village pool.

All this the sentry saw.

In the barn men woke, stretched, yawned, coughed, asked the time.

"Who's on sentry?"

"Dick."

"No. 'E's 'ere, asleep."

"Must be Tom."

"He's here, too."

They flung open the barn-door and saw the fair man standing outside in the lane.

"Gawd! 'E must 'ave done pretty nigh three times 'is share. Tell you what, 'e forgot again. Didn't wake nobody to relieve 'im. Rum cove, O'Hanlon."

"All queer coves, poet chaps."

"'E keeps lookin' up at the sky. 'E told me last time 'e was on, some nights back, 'e forgot to see when 'is hour was up. Bit keen on seein' the dawn, 'e said."

"Look at 'im. Gazing like 'ell. Wonder what 'e sees. Expect as 'ow 'e's likely makin' up rhymes and things about the old clouds. Wonder what 'e does see, though. More'n us blokes, I reckon."

O'Hanlon went on watching the sky. Perhaps these moments of the dawn were the golden gate by which he escaped from the world of reality.

One night a party of entertainers came to the village. Tim and Curly made their way together to the biggest barn. There were two Battalions billetted in the village, and they were present in force. All the forms and chairs were occupied, and there were groups of men on the floor and on heaps of straw in the corners. The

Commanding Officer of Tim's Battalion sat in the middle of the front row of the "stalls." He welcomed the entertainers as they arrived.

"Standing room only," said a freckled boy.

"All the fautoils gone?" asked Curly.

"Well, we'll have a box, mate," said Tim, making for a large biscuit box near the door.

"Private box, ten pounds," said Curly, pointing to the "10-lbs." on the side of the box.

The party knew the way to win a soldier audience from the start. They opened the concert unofficially with a selection of popular refrains played on the piano. The men roared the words, and shouted for more.

"'Eard some o' that lot at the Palladium," said Curly. "That thing about the lark singin' 'is own sweet song."

"I know," said Tim. "Daisy Dingle Dee sang it."

"That's 'er name," said Curly, and Tim had a mental vision of a girl in tights, with blonde ringlets over her shoulders. There was another girl too, he remembered, who sang about her "Ever-loving rag-time man."

The Commanding Officer announced the items and requested encores when the

enthusiasm became too riotous. There were humourous duologues, sentimental ballads, the latest rag-time, recitations, comic songs. It was a regular music-hall night; and once, when a dark girl sang about her "Little home beyond the sunset," Tim imagined that her eyes grew tender, and again he felt the tears burning behind his eyes. But nobody in that audience, not even the poet, saw that evening as anything extraordinary. Perhaps when it is a memory of years ago they will see it all again, and realize the romance that was in it. Delicately clothed ladies in a draughty damp barn, trying to help men to forget ugliness and danger. And only a few miles away the war raging.

The second half of the programme was as successful as the first. A vote of thanks was proposed, there were three hearty cheers, and God Save the King. Then the men trooped back to the billets, whistling and humming and repeating jokes. The concert party were given light refreshments in the officers' mess. Then they motored away to a neighbouring town, where they were due to perform the next day. They left their mark on everyone. The men rolled into their blankets still humming. In the mess the Subalterns sang choruses till they were hoarse. A Company Commander of don-like

gravity could not forget that somebody or other had a "Saucy sort of something in her eye." The Major revealed a talent for "patter," and there was a rumour for many weeks that the Colonel, just before he blew out the candle on his biscuit tin, asseverated, in an undertone loud enough for the Adjutant to hear, that

"Any old night is a wonderful night,
If you're there with a wonderful girl."

That he was out of tune is unimportant.

Tim and Curly talked a long time that night before they went to sleep.

"Think I'm shaping all right?" asked Tim.

"Sure you are," said Curly. "Why, I was cuttin' 'eads off while you was messin' about with beards and whiskers. You new Army blokes pick things up mighty quick. P'raps you wouldn't cut much of a dash on a barrack square. I'm not sayin' that, mind you. I've forgotten more'n you ever knew about that line o' business. But out 'ere you seem to fit in a treat."

Tim smiled and stretched his legs out on the straw.

"It's a good life, an' I'm not kiddin' to you," Curly went on. "I used to fair 'ate it when I 'listed. Thought it was all bands and beer and muckin' barmaids about. I 'ad

a tiff with a girl, and everything went smash-o for a bit. The Army put me right. It's the pals you make, I suppose."

He looked at Tim.

"Thinkin' about Putney?" he asked.

"Sometimes," said Tim.

"Like a few Gers. to shave?"

"Not half."

"You'll be comin' the old soldier over me soon, mate."

Next day, after parade, they got a pass to go into the nearest town. They went by the side of a canal and over a bridge. They found a tea-shop.

"Omelette for deux," said Tim. "Plenty oeufs and café. Compris?"

"Bien, M'sieur," said the girl.

"Not that one gets very hungry," said Tim. "But you must pass the time."

"'Ere's to our next trip up," said Curly, raising a cup of coffee.

After the meal they went to look at the shops. Curly bought one or two gaudy post-cards with flamboyant inscriptions on them. Tim got a magazine. Then they walked back along the canal.

"We'll make a soldier of you yet," said Curly. "But I'm blistered if you'd ever make a barber o' me."

When they got back to their billet they

were met by various rumours. Someone said there was a "show" on in their sector; that they were to go up and take part in it; another man had heard that the Boche was attacking further up, and that they were to go to a different sector.

"Any orders through?" said Curly.

"Nothing yet, mate."

"Then what the flamin' 'ell's all the gas about? Time enough to make a song about it when the orders come through. Don't 'old with rumours."

That night the guns in the distance were very loud. Their anger flashed across the horizon. Tim, lying on his side in the loft, heard, at first faintly, the throb of a machine coming out of the night.

"Douglas," said a boy at his side. "Wonder what's on now?"

The motor-bicycle came nearer. Tim sat up to listen. It stopped at the outskirts of the village, where the officers' mess was. A few minutes later things began to happen. Feet went by outside. A whistle blew. The sentry put his head inside the door, and shouted up to the loft incoherent words. A Sergeant added his own concise remarks. One by one the men woke, and kicked the heavier sleepers. There was a rustling of straw and a muttering. Someone struck a

match and lit a twisted candle. Phrases and exclamations were thrown to and fro, jostling each other. "Chuck us over that boot—Mind out—Bloody strap—Coming over—Damn you!—Where?—Augh!—Get on with it—No, not that one—You blasted fool—Where the hell—?—Move up a bit—How can—?—Bit of orl right—After you with my foot—Support, p'raps—Keep still—Not 'arf—Perishin' moon—There's a war on, son—'Struth!—Where's my flamin' tin—Quick change artists—Gawd!"

And then, above the din, the loud voice of the imperious Sergeant-Major, who, like time and tide, waits for no man. "Get a hustle on!" said the voice, "GET A HUSTLE ON."

War teaches men to wake quickly, with all their wits about them. Order grew quickly out of the confusion. Packs and rifles were sorted out, and there emerged from the noise and chaos files of men fully dressed and in marching order. One or two of the youngest yawned. The rest were silent.

Outside in the street an officer was talking to the Sergeant-Major. Platoon Sergeants were using up all their reserve of irony on the slowest of the men.

"Come on. Doesn't matter about your spats, son."

"Bags of time. It's only a war."

"Send you a postcard, my lad, next time this occurs."

"You, there! Were you born in a Welsh train?"

The guns were grumbling, as if they resented being kept waiting. They were like angry beasts waiting to be fed; angry gods waiting for their sacrifice. The sky to the right was all shot with flame.

"It's not where we was up before," said a voice.

"Sherlock blasted 'Olmes," said Curly.

Two long lines of men became four shorter lines, turned a corner, and were lost in the darkness. The cobbles chimed under the heavy nailed boots. An old woman in a small room did not trouble to peer through the curtains. Such things as this were a part of her life. She just fingered a rosary that hung round her shrivelled neck, and said a prayer, for the guns were growing violent.

"Where are we going, sir?" asked a Sergeant.

"Hell for leather for the line," said the officer. "There's a show on, and we're in support."

CHAPTER V.

WOUNDED.

Tim, as he marched, was at first conscious of extreme sleepiness. When this wore off he began to notice things. The moon rode high, and the slate of a sloping roof gleamed white, as if frosted over. Every twig on a tall elm was clearly outlined, and pools of water had surfaces of silver. Apparently there was going to be no halt. It must be a forced march, and after a time smoking was forbidden. The wind was full of the chill of dawn, and Tim's hands and cheeks were very cold. There was a broadening patch of gray to the East.

They passed through silent villages, where the drab shutters were fastened. Sometimes a dog barked and a chain rattled. On the fields a white powder of frost glistened, and woods came gradually out of the darkness. Presently all the sky was the colour of cold

embers. A lark rose from a field, soaring, and one or two men lifted their heads at its song. A creaking cart came down a road, and they passed a woman working a pump. Over a ridge to the left a long line of cavalry moved slowly up. Bit and bridle jingled. Now and then a mare whinneyed and tossed her head.

Tim was wondering how much further they would have to march. His pack was becoming painful. His shoulders ached, and there was a heavy weight over each eyelid. A staff car cut the silence in two, hurrying back the way they had come. Far ahead white smudges hung about a high-flying aeroplane. A shell burst on the road between the two leading Platoons, who were separated by a wide interval. Another burst apparently among the men in the rear of the Platoon in front of Tim's. He saw a man's hand shoot up. Someone else staggered right out of the ranks, span round, and dropped, arms flung out over the ditch at the roadside. The pace was increased, and soon Tim saw the men in front of him disappearing into an old disused trench.

They distributed themselves in very deep dug-outs, and were told to try to get some sleep. Tim looked round him, and chose a corner place. The floor was uneven with

rubble, and frayed sandbags littered a muddy wooden table in the centre. A dilapidated water-bottle hung from a nail. Curly lay down next to Tim.

"May get pushed up any time now, mate," he said. "Better get a bit o' rest. You stuck that march a treat."

Then he hunched his knees up towards his chin and shut his eyes. Tim dozed, half listening for a shout or the note of a whistle.

The thunder of the guns seemed to soothe him. He found he could not imagine silence. Shells were bursting all round the trench and along the road they had just left. A motor-cyclist dashed by; and then Tim must have lost consciousness.

He was awakened by Curly's foot on his chest. He got up quickly and put his pack on and scrambled out into the trench. It was broad daylight now.

They left the trench and advanced in extended order. The shells were going further back now. A wounded man, with the badge of the Cameron Highlanders, came hobbling along a track that ran through a wood.

"How goes it, Jock?"

"A' richt, ma mannie."

The guns were growing quieter when they came into the wood. Here they closed in

again and were allotted more dug-outs. There was not a whole tree in the wood, and the ground was all branches and splinters. Across the wood ran a trench, with dug-outs at intervals, their entrances almost hidden by brambles and undergrowth. Tim lay down again to sleep.

This time he was awakened by a tremendous explosion. Mud came pouring down the dug-out steps, and for a moment he had a vision of the opening being sealed up—a stifling feeling, and of men the other side working with spades. Most of the other men were awake and standing up.

"What's on, Curly?" said Tim.

"As I figure it, chum, Fritz is making a counter. We must 'ave pinched something orf of 'im. This row looks to me like as if 'e wanted to stop us gettin' up to 'elp stave 'im off. 'Old yourself ready, son."

Soon after this a Sergeant called out, and the men came up.

"And for God's sake keep your distances," Tim heard.

He was surprised to find it was almost dark outside, and he realized with a shock that shells were bursting in the wood. Great red flashes lit up the remnants of trees. He saw a thick trunk almost uprooted. Something whined over his head. He could hear a

fluttering noise as it twisted in the air. As he went on, taking care to keep an interval between himself and the man on either side of him, he passed bodies in unnatural positions. He saw part of a leg, and had to step wide to avoid the ghastly trunk of a body. Outside the wood they bent low and doubled for the beginning of a narrow trench. It was a bad minute. As he ran, Tim heard bullets all about his ears. They flicked up mud at his feet. They sang and whistled by. Some of them had a sound that was almost human. Hardly conscious of what he was doing, he prayed. Rambling, disjointed phrases came into his head. If only it could be over. Suspense tortured him more than the fear of a wound. He wanted to know one way or another. Was he to live or die? On the right a man was squealing.

"Stomach that one," said Curly.

"Stomach," said Tim, mechanically.

And then he thought, "What good am I as a fighter in this state?" The thought annoyed him, and he became calmer. He tried to persuade himself that whatever happened would happen, however he looked at it. He wondered if he looked anything like a picture he remembered from his early days. It was a charge in the South African

War. He rather wanted to look like part of that picture. He gripped his rifle tighter, and found himself at the entrance to the trench. So that was over and he was through. He slowed down behind Curly and they splashed through the mud. He noticed details: an old cap in the mud; a rifle sling; part of a greatcoat; and then, coming round a traverse, found himself in the front line.

There was a murmur of relief from the men on the firesteps, for there were large gaps in their line. Wounded lay under the shelter of the parapet. Some were having their arms, or legs, or heads bandaged. Others just lay with closed eyes, twitching. Their lips moved. A tongue was passed over dry lips.

"You're just in time, mate," said a Corporal to Tim.

"Is he coming?" asked Tim.

"Bound to, in a minute. He's fair given us a basting. Look at the bloody trench."

Tim looked, and saw dishevelled sandbags and mounds of earth lying across the trenchway. The splintered framework of a dug-out was behind him. There was someone crying inside.

"O God, O God!" said a voice, "O God, God!"

Tim got up on a firestep and saw that his

rifle was loaded and in order. He had hardly got up there when a murmur came down the line. Tim made a comfortable rest for his rifle and saw that his ammunition was handy. A Vérey light went up, disclosing the broken ground of No Man's Land and the tattered British wire. A dim rampart marked the German line. It looked as if the rampart was moving. Then figures detached themselves. A sentry shouted something; a big piece of shrapnel struck the parados. Smoke and flying earth were Tim's impressions. He could hear the Lewis guns. He rubbed his hands to get back the circulation.

"Get going," said Curly.

And Tim laughed. He would have laughed at anything at that moment. He thought of Ginger; he was going to kill someone. He looked along his sights and fired. He couldn't tell if he had hit anyone. He went on firing into the gray mass, and as it came nearer he could see men falling. But they came on. It was like firing at a mobile wall. Nearer and nearer they came, until he could see them pitching forwards, hands going up to faces, legs and arms shooting out spasmodically. He became elated, and started to fire as rapidly as he could manipulate the bolt and reload. Old

lessons on the barrack square flashed through his mind; the face of some sergeant and a voice saying "Rapid loading practice." Funny little red dummy cartridges. And now—this. One or two men got ahead of the rest. Tim picked one of them out and fired. The man came on. "Mustn't lose my head," thought Tim, and remembered "If you lose your 'ead . . . ."

Evidently the Germans were not thinking of giving up. They struggled on. On Tim's left a man blasphemed, stiffened up, and tottered off the firestep. Tim saw him clap his hand to the side of his head, noticed the fair hair. It was the poet. An officer by the side of Curly was shouting. It was the Company Commander, bare-headed. The Germans were up to the wire. Some of them stuck there and were shot to bits. Still the rest came on. And then Tim's impression became confused. It was like a Kaleidoscope or a cubist picture. There were bared teeth, heads drenched in blood, wild eyes, grunts, shouts, screams, blasphemies, filthy words. And then, before he could quite gather what had happened, Tim was puffing at a cigarette and Curly was pointing out to him a batch of surly-looking prisoners.

"I've been through my first fight,"

thought Tim, "and I've managed to come out all right."

Afterwards he wondered how anyone can possibly escape death at such times.

Orders were given to repair the trench, and Tim found the aftermath of battle much worse than the attack itself. He saw the poet being carried down on a stretcher. His head was bandaged and the bearers said he was unconscious, but that it wasn't a serious wound. He came on wounded men wherever he turned.

Later, after a hunk of bread and cheese, he sat down against the parados and wrote home to Putney by the light of the rising sun.

"I've come through my first attack," he wrote. "They attacked, not us. It's not pleasant, but anyway I'm all sound and well, but a bit tired. I'll write you a proper letter as soon as we get out of the line."

Then he went and joined a group round a brazier.

"'Ere's to the return match," said Curly, "on their ground."

They all drank the toast in mugs of tea. Then they sang, in low tones, their favourite song.

"Ah," said Curly, "but there was a thing I 'eard a chap sing back in billets.

Can't remember the end two lines, somehow. Grand song it was, though."

He began at the beginning of a song that was becoming popular in England at the time. When he came to the last two lines he stumbled, and then stopped dead.

"No, it's no good. Wish one of you knew it."

"Got any idea what's holding you up, mate?" asked Tim.

"Yes, just one word—something about festivities or something."

The section proceeded to work on the battered trench. They were working still under a heavy fire, for the German gunners were trying to make up for the failure of their infantry.

"H.E.," said Tim, as the sandbags near the sentry's head came hurtling into the trench, bringing the periscope with them.

"Something about festivities, or something," muttered Curly, lighting a stump of cigarette. Gradually the whole section was drawn into the search for the missing word, but nobody had heard the song.

"When my leave comes through," said Tim, "I'll drop you a line, my old son, and let you know what it is."

"Yes, chum, but I want to know now. I want to sing the ruddy thing before I go an'

forget the tune. This lot'll pretty soon be done," he added, putting the finishing touches to the shattered parados.

A few minutes afterwards a shell disturbed a quarter of an hour's work.

"Not 'wedding,' I suppose?" asked Tim, starting to patch up all over again.

"No, that's not the word, mate," said Curly.

The Platoon Officer came down the trench, and met the Lewis Gun Officer coming the other way.

"How are things?"

"Not so dusty," said the Lewis Gun Officer. "We got a nice bag. Ration party or something. If the beggars will run up against the wire what is one to do, old boy? Can't let 'em go."

"No, it's not done. Well, cheerio! Must be pushing on."

"Cheer-oh!"

The Platoon Officer took a spade and helped the section for a while before passing on.

"He's all right," said Curly.

At the far end of the bay where the section was working, a shell, bursting on the parapet, brought in an avalanche of mud and sandbags, burying the sentry. Tim seized his pick and ran towards the mound. Three

fingers were twitching out of the heap. Curly was there first.

"For Gawd's sake, mate," he said, "not a pick!"

Tim realized his mistake, and made way. Curly and another man dug the sentry out, and called for stretcher-bearers.

"Chap with our lot," said Curly, "lost his nerve when 'is pal was buried. He rushed up with a pick. It came out red."

Presently he looked up.

"Coronation. Coronation. No, that's not the word."

They worked with renewed energy, and now and then paused to look over the parapet. The German bombardment was becoming feebler. Presently a British aeroplane passed overhead, travelling fast, evidently searching out a battery, for very soon afterwards the German shooting became wilder and finally died out. The British guns increased their activity, and the men of the section saw the trench gradually resume its normal aspect.

"Bit more ship-shape now," said Tim. "More like home."

Then by sheer bad luck a stray German shell burst just behind the parados, tumbling the trench-wall down again.

"Your turn, Dick," said a tall, freckled man.

"Righto, matey. Gawd! What a jubilee!"

"A what?" roared Curly.

"A jubilee, I said," replied the other, surprised.

"Got it, got it, got it!

'Come on along with me,
We'll have a jubilee
In my old Kentucky home.'

That's the ending, mate. Put it there."

He shook hands vigorously with the astonished man.

That night the whole section was singing the song, and it soon became the tradition in the Platoon to sing it whenever there was a German bombardment on.

In time Curly came to regard himself as almost the author of it . . . .

"Talking of 'ome," Curly went on, "makes you feel kind of sentimental, like. Makes you wonder 'ow the old woman's gettin' on." He wiped a clot of mud off his rifle.

"Never forget meetin' 'er," he said. "It was like this. I'd gone into the 'Olborn Empire to see the show one night. I popped out between whiles to get a drink and a packet o' fags. An' there she was. Large

as life. I'd seen 'er often, you know, but I saw 'er kind o' different, I reckon, that night. I was a youngster then. I forgot all about the drink and the fags."

"An' what may you be wantin'?" says she.

"Now you're askin'," says I.

"Can't you make your mind up?" says she.

"It's made up," says I.

"And you want—?"

"A packet o' fags," I says, playing with 'er emotions, as you might say. I leans over to take the fags, and my 'and rests on 'er's for a second. "Steruth!" I says. "What eyes!"

"Get on with you," says she.

"I'm gettin' on as fast as I can," I answers.

"'Ow many 'ave you said pretty things to?" she asks, saucy like.

"'Eaps," I says. "But I never meant 'em. It was a kind of 'abit."

"What a nice 'abit," she says, sort of tender, an' lookin' at me till my ears fair tingled. Of course that done it. We were spliced two weeks after. I allus was a romantic sort o' beggar.

"I expect it was your uniform that fetched her," said Tim, looking at Curly's

mud-stained clothes.

"Uniform be damned. I was a well-set-up young 'un in those days. Just 'listed. 1904 it was."

"How did you meet your's, Tim?" someone asked.

Tim looked up.

"Met her in a flower shop," he said. "Told her she beat all the flowers in the world."

"So you wore 'er in your button-'ole," interrupted Curly.

Tim thought of the fresh young face among the flowers, and the walks in Kew Gardens, and the meetings; how he had taken her to theatres; how they had gone on the river at Richmond; how they had set about keeping house. He remembered watching the boat race with her from somewhere near Putney Bridge.

"Wonder how many o' them blokes we done in in that last scrap was married," said Curly.

"Doesn't do to think," said Tim, and Curly laughed, recalling his talk to Tim on that subject.

He puffed at his pipe in silence.

"Feel like 'earing a sentimental love song," he said. "You know. 'Earts and roses and things."

On sentry, early next morning, Tim was in a thoughtful mood. He began to hope most earnestly that he would not be killed out here in France. There were so many things he wanted to return to; things he had never really appreciated before, could not appreciate until there was a chance of losing them. He began to see that life is very precious when death is a constant menace. He had never been really cold or hungry or tired or frightened before, and the trenches were already branding him, reacting on his character. What made him so disgusted with it all was the absence of romance, as he had conceived it. Death here was just death, an ugly, sad, dull affair. Again he thought of Ginger, death with no glory. Tim was not far enough away from his new experiences to be able to see the glory or the romance.

The next day the section knew that their Company was to attack. They were to be relieved after the attack. Their objective was a trench and a strong point in the German lines. Tim's Platoon was to deal with the strong point.

He found time to write a note to Meg, "in case anything happens." This he addressed and gave to Curly.

* * * * *

It was all over very quickly.

A young officer, with a watch on either wrist, stood at the foot of a scaling ladder. The preliminary bombardment was over. There was a whistle and the men clambered over the top. The air was alive with bullets at once. Tim kept his distance from the man next to him. It was rather like the training at home, he thought. Someone made a joke and laughed. Ahead Tim saw wire, cut in many places by the artillery, and something that looked like a circular wall, with loop-holes almost overgrown by weeds and grass. It seemed a miracle not to be hit. He heard the half surprised, half annoyed exclamation of a man hit in the thigh. Another man fell without a sound. Tim saw the crumpled attitude of his body. "Poor old Joe," he thought. A wounded sergeant cursed, and a young officer shouted something Tim could not hear. Then he pointed ahead and Tim saw a machine-gun to the right of their objective. It was apparently being fired from a shell-hole. Tim stepped towards the officer.

"We'll out that," said the officer.

"Yes, sir," said Tim, wondering what would happen next.

They began to run in an oblique direction. Soon they were at the end of the Platoon.

They ran on behind the next Platoon, and they could see the German team working the gun.

"My God," thought Tim. "It's mad, it's impossible. No, it isn't. It won't be. It can't be. Hell! Now for it."

He and the officer ran faster. Tim was being beaten. It was really rather like a race. Must save up a bit of wind. Final sprint, sort of thing. Huiph! Huiph! Huiph! Huiph! Near thing.

A burning pain in his side made him grunt involuntarily. He spun over. He could not get up again. He saw, in a fury of impotence, the Germans holding their hands up. Two of them. The officer had covered them with his revolver.

"Blast the whole thing," said Tim. "I'll—ugh!"

A sharp pain caught him and he lay still. "Down and out," he thought. "But why just at this moment? But why? Hell!"

Then his ears sang, and he felt sick. He must be dying. It was—all—so—black.

He was unconscious when they picked him up. They took him to a dressing station on the fringe of a battered wood, and dressed his wound. When he came to they gave him Bovril. After that he became unconscious again. They took him by ambulance to a

clearing station, and then on a Red Cross train to a base hospital. He woke from time to time, with a great pain in his side. His head ached, too. He had to lie very still.

"Knocked out in the first show," he thought. "But I wonder if I'm going home. By jove! I wonder."

CHAPTER VI.

TO THE SOMME.

The time came when a weak but contented Tim was carried out of the base hospital. He found the nurse at his side one night before he went to sleep.

"You're going home," she said.

"What, not really home? Not Blighty?"

"Yes. Blighty."

"Well, isn't that great?" said Tim.

"Isn't it?" said the nurse, smoothing the pillow. "You'll want all the rest you can get to-night to give you enough strength for the journey."

When she had gone Tim lay awake a long time. He wanted to keep on surprising himself with that news. He wished he could have someone to tell him it again. A flesh wound in the hip had behaved badly and had turned septic. He had expected a long lonely sojourn in the base hospital. And now, suddenly, this news.

"Putney again," said Tim. "Coo!"

Next morning they drove him away in an ambulance to the quayside, where he was put on a hospital ship. It was a calm passage, and for most of the trip a Padre sat at Tim's side. He knew Putney, he said. Oh yes. He knew it. Most likely he had been inside Tim's shop. He couldn't say for certain that he remembered the shop. But at any rate he knew the place. He had been along roads where Tim and Meg had walked together.

"Expect we'll be doing that again soon."

"Rather," said the Padre; "but of course there's hospital first. Do you know where they're sending you?"

"No, sir," said Tim, and a silence followed.

He had not thought of that. Perhaps he'd be put away miles from home. Some barren place in Scotland. Such things happened. Or Devonshire. Nice if Meg could come down to him, though.

"Look here," said the Padre, "when you get into the train the other end you ask for the M.O. Ask him if any particular arrangements have been made about you. If they haven't, say you'd like, if possible, to be somewhere near your home. Somewhere in London."

" I'll do that, sir," said Tim, feeling very grateful for the tip.

When the Padre left him the pain of his wound took him back to the trenches and Curly. He wondered how the fight had gone. The Battalion would probably be resting now. He could almost see Curly asleep on the straw; snoring, he'd be, of course.

He was carried off the boat and put into the train, wondering if he could really be in England again. It seemed so very long that he had been away. His few days and nights of war had been fuller than many years of normal life. He had hardly settled himself before he heard the Padre's voice.

" Along here, I think," said the voice. " He's a friend of mine. If it could be managed—."

" Hullo!" said the M.O., when Tim was pointed out. " Feeling all right?"

" Pretty fair, sir."

" So you want to be in London?"

" If possible, sir."

" I think we can manage it," said the M.O., and Tim was too delighted to speak.

From where he lay he could see the fields and hedges flying by. Hedges! They were a welcome sight. And the neat, orderly little houses, all looking so comfortable and secure.

" It's good to be back," he said.

The train came into Charing Cross after dusk. On his way to the ambulance Tim could see familiar English porters and a crowd of people in the station entrance. Someone shouted out a number and then a name, which Tim understood to refer to a hospital. They put him in an ambulance, and he lay back contentedly. There was a rippling cheer as the column began to move. He saw an eager flushed face and an upstretched arm. Some flowers landed on his chest. He picked them up with a strange feeling. Somewhere at the back of his mind he had an impression of a knight, and ladies showering flowers on him. It must have been something he had read. He wished Meg were here. He hoped she had got his last letter and the field postcard saying he was coming home. But no. Of course she couldn't have got that yet. It would all be a surprise for her.

They went slowly out of the station, past a group of taxis, past the tobacconist's shop and the Exchange Office, and turned outside the gates to the left. The swirl of the traffic caught Tim's ambulance and took it through surging streets. He was too tired to notice much, but he was full of a great content.

He must have fallen into a deep sleep, for

when he opened his eyes again he was in bed in a long ward. A dim light burnt at the end of the ward, and he could see a nurse sitting reading. Another nurse was bending over a bed on his left. He lay quite still, letting the peace of it into his brain, watching the light and shadow round the lamp, and the gold in the nurse's hair. Then he stirred, and the pain came on him again. At the sound of his movement the nurse left the man she had been attending to and came over to him.

"Not well?" she said, in the quiet voice they learn in hospitals.

"Headache," said Tim. "Side hurts, too."

She brought him a silk handkerchief soaked in eau-de-cologne. After that he had his wound dressed.

"Any chance of getting word home?" asked Tim.

"Oh, yes. Rather," said the nurse.

She offered to write for him, and he dictated a short note to his wife. He simply said he was home and nothing dangerous the matter with him, and would she come and see him soon, between two and four in the afternoon.

When the novelty of being home in England wore off—and he had been in France

only a very short time—his days began to be monotonous. He grew tired of reading magazines and fiction, and he looked forward to his wife's visits more and more. One or two other people came to see him, too. A sister of Meg's; an old gentleman whom he had shaved every morning; a tobacconist from Putney, bearing welcome gifts of tobacco and cigarettes. But it was a happy moment when he was allowed to go out for the first time. Meg came for him, and they went for a short walk. Later on he was allowed out for longer, and the day came when he saw Putney again and the shop, and Steve with his gray hair and weary smile, doing his best to "carry on."

When he was finally discharged from hospital there was leave, and he and Meg settled down to enjoy themselves. Both knew that one day he would have to go back again to the front. These were splendid days for the two of them. They went to the Palladium, and Tim made a mental note of a song for Curly. They had high teas at the Strand Corner House. They went for walks in Kew Gardens and walks over Wimbledon Common and walks through all manner of unexplored streets in London. They found themselves on the Chelsea Embankment one day, and attracted by a quaint tea-shop

went in and had tea. It was only when they were coming out that Tim saw, near the door, the fair-haired poet. He was sitting at a table with a young girl, and both looked sad. They were not talking. Tim thought he had never seen anything so sad as her eyes.

The poet recognized him. There were introductions.

"You going out again?" said Tim.

"Yes. I'm on final leave from the depôt. Go out to-morrow."

"Give my love to Curly."

"Curly's at the depôt," said the poet. "He was wounded soon after you."

"Badly?" asked Tim.

"No. Just leg wound."

"Well," said Tim, "I expect I'll be joining you one day. I've got another couple of weeks' leave. Then I expect there'll be a week or two at the depôt."

"Lucky man," said the girl, and she smiled, but under the smile lay untold things, and she looked at Meg in what Tim described as a "mighty funny way."

"Lovely auburn hair, she had," said Meg. "Wonder if they're married, or engaged."

They wandered up Cheyne Walk, up Oakley Street, and across the King's Road. They stopped to look at a vivid poster on the wall of the Chelsea Palace, and then went on

by way of Sydney Street, through a Churchyard, and down Whiteheads Grove. Opposite a low gray house they stopped. There was an Aberdeen terrier scampering about a diminutive garden. They could see through the window a comfortable sitting room. There were gay chintzes and books and photographs.

"One day," said Tim, "we'll move into town and have a place like this. Oh, I don't know, though. Country's better, perhaps."

"Country if we can," said Meg. "Otherwise something like this."

They went home by motor-'bus.

When Tim got back to his Regiment, near London, they kept him on light duty for some time. A medical board found that he was still "shaky." He was not allowed to do long marches, and most of his time was occupied in fatigues. After duty he could nearly always go home for an hour or two, so that Meg was quite contented. Curly, whom he found as soon as he arrived, was due to go out again with the next draft, and Tim watched him go off.

"Time you joined us, Tim," he said.

"Don't expect I'll be long now," said Tim.

But he was kept at home longer than he

expected. Spring wore away. Summer came, and the battles of the Somme, and then the doctors found him fit for general service. He went out with a draft early in the morning from Victoria Station. Meg insisted on seeing him off this time. There was a big crowd when they arrived at the station, and a buzz of conversation. Most of the women were smiling, but the smile came through a shadow. Some of the men who had nobody to see them off were already in the train, making themselves comfortable.

A whistle blew, and then another. It was the moment of the women's last smile, the moment when little Cockney women and uneducated girls rose to heights that poets have dreamed. No one but a woman can know what that last smile costs. It does not waver when the train begins to move. It lasts until the men can no longer see the platform. Then it breaks suddenly.

Tim stood at the window, waving. Meg waved back. Further up the train men were singing:

"When there's trouble brewing,
When there's something doing,
Are we downhearted? NO!
Let 'em all come!
Here we are, Here we are,
Here we are again . . . ."

And from another carriage came:

"Oh, I
Don't want to die,
I want to go 'ome."

Tim turned, sat down, and lit a cigarette, which went out, unnoticed, almost immediately. He was very glad when the journey was over. He wanted something to take his mind away from things he could not help thinking about.

He found the Battalion out of the line, in billets; and Curly lying asleep as usual. There was something comfortable in his snoring that suggested to Tim a home-coming.

"Blind me!" said Curly, when he woke. "It's you, is it?"

"It's me, chum," said Tim.

"Welcome 'ome. 'Ow's everything?"

"Pretty fair. How long have we been out?"

"Two days. Up again soon. We're goin' somewhere down the Somme way next time. I reckon this war's been child's play so far compared with what we'll see there. 'Ow's the missis?"

"All right," said Tim. "O'Hanlon back?"

"Yes, 'e's 'ere. Rum cove. I reckon 'e 'ates this business about as much as a chap

can 'ate anything. It's one up to 'im for stickin' it. Afraid 'e'll stop one. It's allus those chaps that do, leastways that's what I've noticed."

At night Tim sat down to write a letter home. He did not tell Meg he was going to the Somme, because he did not want to worry her. He was too unsophisticated to know that a woman imagines the worst until she is told the truth. Meg would have been happier if Tim had told her frankly that he was going down to the Somme.

For two days the Battalion remained in billets. On the third they set off. They entrained, and there was a long, roundabout, tedious journey. For hours they travelled. There were moments of interest when they passed a big town or saw a cage of German prisoners, otherwise it was as uneventful as journeys in troop trains usually are. Once a crowd of Scotsmen sang 'Loch Lomond.' "For me and my true love will never meet again" they sang, in perfect harmony. Tim wondered if they could possibly realize what they were singing, or the circumstances under which they were singing it. Most British soldiers are certainly not sentimental. But Tim, hearing the song, grew silent, until Curly dug him in the ribs and asked for a cigarette.

The heat in the carriages became almost unbearable, for a hot summer sun blazed down over the countryside. Tim tried to sleep, but could not get comfortable. So he stared out of the window again. The roads seemed full of activity, wherever he looked. Lorries, column after column, raced between the poplars. Often they passed billets with French troops lounging in narrow lanes and at barn doors. They drew up at one very big town, and little girls came along from carriage to carriage, hoisting their baskets. Tim was too drowsy to look at the contents. Flies buzzed over the panes. They settled on his face and hands.

"Cursed flies," he said.

"You thank your stars you aren't no cow," said Curly. "Fancy 'aving to spend your life swishin' your tail about your 'ide, tryin' to knock the beggars off, and them laughin' all the time, knowing they blinkin' well mean to come back and 'ave another do."

"My God, I'll be mighty glad when this trip's through," Tim went on.

"Don't you be in no 'urry, son. I reckon what's waiting for us can wait a bit longer, and it won't be none too pleasant when it does come. You be content to 'ave shelter, and a bit o' quiet while you can get it."

"Perhaps you're right," said Tim sarcastically, feeling irritable.

The train went on again, slower than before, and the sun went down the sky. A breeze with something cool in it ruffled the trees.

"Thank the Lord for a cool wind," said Tim.

Billets were not plentiful on the Somme, and that night, having marched up from the railhead, the Battalion bivouaced on an open plain. Tim and Curly stood at the opening of a tent, watching the gun-flashes and listening to the continuous roar ahead. It was a desolate scene, varied only by utter ruin. Boards indicated woods and villages, but of those woods and villages there remained little more than stubs and dust. Before they turned in they wandered about among half-made roads and gigantic holes. They came across places with famous names. From the crest of rising ground they could see other groups of tents, and horses picketed. In a sunken road they saw a dead horse, with a yawning wound in its back and its head almost severed. Near it there was a deep hole.

"Bomb, I reckon," said Curly. "The 'planes do a lot o' that at night down 'ere. That'll be a new one on you, night raids.

They're fair bastards."

They walked back to their tent and took off their boots and puttees. It was beginning to rain.

"Seems to me," said Tim, "we're up against something a bit bigger this time."

"You're dead right," said Curly.

In the middle of the night Tim was awakened by a violent detonation, followed in close succession by a noise of beasts stampeding. He heard a droning overhead, and guessed that the night-raiders were at work. He looked down at Curly, who was snoring peacefully.

"I was never meant for a soldier," thought Tim, his mind full of pictures of mangled horses.

The next morning they marched off again. They went along a narrow winding road, over ridges and through the rubble of dead villages and charred woods. They passed columns of men in muddy steel helmets. There were old trenches, British and German; there were mounds of shell-cases, and crumbling gun emplacements; there were stretches of ground littered with old gas-masks, bombs, fragments of clothing, rifles, bayonets, rusted wire; there were chasms where mines had exploded, and craters with remnants of wire on each lip, showing hurried attempts at

fortification against attack. The Germans were shelling a wood on the right. There was little of it left, but sufficient to conceal a battery. They were shelling a road, too, further back. Once Tim saw a tank. It was lying in the mud, heeling over to one side. He was so intent on it that he nearly fell into a hole.

"In the last eight or nine years o' this war," said Curly, "someone with a great fat brain 'll come along and join up all these 'oles and fill 'em up with water. It would make a tidy-sized sea, I reckon. In those days we'll go up to the line in ships. No more marchin'!"

There was a line of sausage-shaped balloons in the air. Tim counted thirty-seven of them. Then there was a halt. They were to rest in a wood until late afternoon before going into the line. Tim seized the opportunity to write to Meg. When he had finished he went to the edge of the wood and looked at the country around. It was unlike anything he had seen before. Every square inch bore signs of battles fought. It was all scarred and churned up. He knew that what he had been through before was nothing compared to what he was now called upon to face. He knew he was to be tested to the utmost.

When he settled himself for a few hours' sleep he heard, beside him, the regular snore of Curly.

CHAPTER VII.

SHELLS—AND MUD.

Towards evening they lined up and marched out of the wood. They marched for some time by the side of a field railway. French troops were at work on it. Then they struck off across country. Rain had fallen during the day, and the ground was slippery. There was a halt at Brigade Headquarters, a big dug-out, where guides were attached to the Platoons. Every British gun on the sector seemed to be firing. The ground shook continuously. They crossed a field where there was a dump of barbed-wire. The Germans were "crumping," but they crossed from one corner to another without casualties. Tim listened to the lazy whine, wondering where each shell would burst. A "crump" has something lazy in its voice.

When they came to the far side of the field they went along a trench. It was growing dark, and the star-shells and flares had begun. Tim could see gun-flashes on every side. Towards the end of the trench each man stepped over a fallen body. It was a man in khaki. He had fallen head-foremost, facing away from the line. Perhaps he was a wounded man who had been trying to get to an aid-post and had lost his way. Perhaps he had been taking a message to Brigade Headquarters. Tim was struck with the idea that it is worse to see a lonely dead body in a place that seems secure than to see scores of killed in the front line. One knows how their death comes, up there in the trenches, but with an isolated body discovered suddenly it is different. So many things may have happened.

They scrambled up from the trench and seemed to come suddenly into the open arms of War. Tim found himself on a sunken road. The first thing he knew was that when once the Platoon was in the roadway it would be hedged round by shells. Perhaps it was a barrage, he thought. They came down an embankment in single file, the guide leading, and started to walk over uneven earth and tree-branches and splintered wood from dug-outs. There

was a man sitting on the road outside a smashed dug-out, smoking his pipe. A tree, leaning over from the side of the road, had been half uprooted. Every few yards there were chasms, and men lying dead in every attitude. Tim knew for the first time the smell of death. Once a shower of earth came over him like spray, filling his eyes. For a moment he did not know whether he had been hit or not. There was a loud singing in his ears.

They turned off the road and went up another trench. Here they were among the supports. The men were huddled against the trench walls. Further on others were trying to build up the damage that had been done. Presently the order came up to get out of the trench and go across the open. Tim understood that things were pretty bad higher up the trench. It was a dark night, and there was only a small distance to run. Each man ran as hard as he could, for before they reached the front line a German machine gun had found them. They scrambled into the trench, and the relief took place in the middle of a violent bombardment.

The trench seemed to be heaving into the air. The dug-outs were blown in. Trench boards lay in fragments. Braziers were smashed. Here and there lay a spade handle,

part of a battered rifle. The men covered their faces with their hands from time to time, for the air was full of flying things, each making its own strange noise. Things came raving and whining and screaming and whistling out of the darkness. There was nothing to do but crouch there and wait. Tim gripped his rifle, dug his nails into the stock to steady himself. Curly was altering the straps of his pack.

The uproar continued. Once there was a sound that was different from the whirr of a sandbag or the whistle of a bit of wood; it made Tim feel faint. It was the sound of a mutilated body uplifted and flung down, jetsam of the battlefield.

The poet, O'Hanlon, dug his hands into the earth. He was mentally wounded, as if some terrible fact had hit his mind. More than all the danger, the horror haunted him. He tried to feel pride, tried to find, behind and interwoven with the ugliness, the Idea. Before, sometimes, it had showed through the misery and the horror, like the face of a beautiful woman through a veil. But now it was impossible to see anything but the ghastly reality. How could one find romance there? And then he looked at Curly, and Curly winked. If one could express what that wink held, all that it stood for, then

one could explain the regular soldier, make him clear to the world. It was so solemnly done that it made O'Hanlon laugh. It seemed to say "They are going it, aren't they." Tim, also, saw it, and smiled.

The bombardment was not the worst of that night. There were some German wounded and prisoners in the trench, for it had been won but a short while ago. One of the prisoners, a Saxon boy with blue eyes, went mad during the night. His screams made even Curly stop his ears. There was, too, one bay which was literally carpeted with dead, almost trodden into the wet mud. One had to walk over them, whistling, or making a joke. In a dug-out, the entrance of which was nearly blocked with earth, there were two German officers, killed by gas. There was a half-smoked cigar by the side of one of them. Tim thought of Ginger, and came to the conclusion that his death was the best thing that could have befallen him. "He would have gone mad in this," thought Tim.

The fury of the bombardment abated towards dawn, and the cool wind was welcome after a hot night.

"So this," said Tim, "is being on the Somme."

"Deal o' row last night, wasn't there?" said Curly. "Might 'ave thought they was

winnin' the war from the fuss they made."

They made a breakfast of damp bread and quantities of jam.

"O' course," said Curly, wiping his lips with his sleeve, "o' course, mind you, the sort o' thing we're going to get up 'ere passes the time bags quicker than the old dull business you get in some parts. There's more row than usual, that's all, but you're out o' the line what seems sooner. Leave comes sooner. It kind o' shoves the 'ole war on a bit. Why, Laventie way you could 'ave cried with bein' bored. There was a rat I used to sit and wait for o' nights. Out 'e'd come, reg'lar, every night, crawlin' over your legs. Allus came same time. Got to tell the time by 'im. 'E was so reg'lar in 'is 'abits 'e must 'ave been a Gerboy rat."

Away to the right a Strombos horn sounded. Other horns, nearer, took up the note. There were answering echoes behind. A sentry shouted and beat a gong. Respirators were adjusted, and the men stood-to. Tim ran down the trench to rouse some men who were resting under a rough shelter. The Company Commander sent back "Gas!" to the artillery, who opened fire at once. On his way back to his fire-step Tim saw a man covering some ammunition with old pieces of P.H. helmet. He helped

to cover some bombs with strips of the same material, to prevent the safety-pins becoming locked. Fragments of instruction swam in his mind. "As little movement as possible. . . . Fire your rifle at intervals. . . . No talking. . . . The enemy will not attack until some minutes after the releasing of the gas. . . . Often they are back in their support lines, to avoid the British curtain of fire."

It was not long before Tim realized there was something wrong with his box-helmet. It was evidently a small defect that had escaped his notice. He had not been calm enough to inspect it the night before. But now there was no doubt about it. There was an unpleasant sensation at the back of his throat; his eyes hurt; something tasted sweet. There was only one thing to do. He must pretend hard that it was only a gas test at home; that he was in the gas-chamber. He loosened his P.H. helmet in its satchel, held his breath, whipped the box-helmet off, and effected the change.

The Germans sent over two waves of gas with an interval between. During the interval the fans were used vigorously in the British trench. Then the Germans tried a ruse. They sent over a smoke wave, under cover of which a party advanced. It was

the kind of ruse to succeed with raw troops. But the party was met by a steady fire. It wavered and withdrew.

A man near Tim stepped down rather heavily from the fire-step. He made a queer noise in his throat, his left hand shot up to his right shoulder, and his rifle clattered to the ground. Tim and Curly were by his side as he fell. He made frantic efforts to tear his gas-helmet off; but the gas was not clear of the trench. They had to hold him down. A third man bandaged his shoulder. Presently he grew too exhausted to struggle, and they carried him to the stretcher-bearers' dug-out and left him there.

Rain fell in torrents for a long time after this. It came in gusts, driven by the wind. Tim and Curly spent most of their time in filling sandbags. It was a question of constantly shifting one's position, to avoid sinking in above the ankles. The shell-holes in No Man's Land and behind the parados were full of water.

"I suppose," said Curly one morning, "you couldn't 'old that flamin' sack still. Might make it easier to chuck the earth in."

"If you didn't want to put all this smiling land of France in at once," said Tim, "you'd get on better."

"Come on, come on. It's not no girl's

'and you're 'olding."

Drops of rain trickled from their helmets on to their cheeks, leaving little lines where they washed off the mud.

"More water 'ere," said Curly, "than there is at them Divisional Baths."

"It's about time we made a raft."

"Yes, and went lookin' for a bloomin' desert island to land on."

"Five," counted Tim, laying a sandbag on a pile of others.

The cry of a wounded man from the next bay took them quickly round the traverse. A fragment of shell had given him an ugly head wound. He was groaning. They helped two stretcher-bearers to make him comfortable.

Then came a deafening detonation.

"Seems like our bay," said Tim.

"Shakes my liver into 'eaps and bundles," said Curly.

They went back round the traverse, and burst into laughter. They laughed so loud that the Platoon Commander came along to see what was the matter with them. He found them leaning on their spades.

"What the deuce is the joke?" asked the officer.

"It's like this, sir," said Tim.

"Yes, it's like this, sir," said Curly. "You see, sir, them sandbags"—and he

pointed to a jumbled heap of earth and torn sandbags—"Well, them things is our work, so to speak, for the last 'alf-hour. That shell must 'ave landed clean on 'em, sir."

"Well, I suppose it's funny," said the officer. "But it takes a real sense of humour to see the joke."

"Might be worse," said Curly, looking at the result of the shell.

The rest of that period in the trenches was more or less uneventful. There were constant bombardments that made sleep impossible for Tim. He found that shell-fire was a thing he dreaded more and more. He did not get used to it, as he heard some men did. He was a very heavy-eyed Tim when they marched out.

They bivouaced in a muddy little valley for three days. Most of the time they spent in cleaning their things and sleeping and writing letters. Tim found two letters from Meg waiting for him. They seemed quite cheerful, which pleased him.

On the night before they went into the line again the band of one of the Battalions which was resting near them played selections outside the officers' mess tent. Tim sat on a pack at his tent door and listened. It played "Our Miss Gibbs" and a waltz from "The Pink Lady," then, becoming more

modern, " The Broken Doll," " Every Little While," and a ragtime Tim did not know. At the end it played Schubert's " Nightingale." All the time the guns were muttering in the distances, and Tim thought of the strangeness of life.

They went into the line again, and on the first day watched the British artillery bombarding a village on a ridge ahead of them, behind the German lines. They saw, through orange-coloured dust and white dust, masonry falling and trees lopped off at the stem, as if giant hands were at work.

In the afternoon the German artillery retaliated. Curly was asleep at the time under a waterproof sheet. The Platoon rested one section at a time, and Curly was making the best of his opportunity. Tim was sitting in the bottom of the trench smoking and reading one of his wife's letters. But Curly snored on, his knees hunched up.

" Soon be our turn to get on with it again," said Tim.

He was unshaven and dirty from head to foot. His eyes had the brightness that comes from long-sustained fatigue and exposure. There were shadows under them. Two or three men sat near him. One was cleaning his rifle; another was reading a stained copy of a provincial newspaper; a third had his

housewife on his knees, and was stitching a button on his tunic.

"Curly's a cool chap," said Tim. "Just look at him sleeping away there."

"He takes a lot o' beatin', does old Curly. 'E don't care no more about shells than if they was just so many rose-leaves bein' chucked at 'im. Seems to 'ave a kind o' charmed life, too."

A shell burst near, and the earth showered into the trench.

"Blast!" said Tim.

The man who was reading the paper looked up.

"Another V.C. from my 'ome," he said, tapping the paper with his fore-finger.

Curly slept on.

Presently Tim got up and stretched himself.

"I'm for a biscuit," he said. "Anyone have one?"

He went to a shelter with a waterproof sheet protection. Here there was a tin of biscuits, and he started to remove the lid. His hand slipped and the tin fell, landing on a duck-board. At the sound of the clatter Curly started violently and woke. He opened his eyes and looked round with anger. His eyes fell on the tin, and he moistened his lips to speak.

"Which of you," he said, "which of you done that?"

He caught sight of Tim.

"Oh, it's you, is it. You great long-legged, bleary-eyed blighter. Can't you look what you're doin', wakin' folk up with your fussin' about? Why don't you make a bit o' row, you mouse, you?"

"The sleeping beauty," said Tim.

"If you knew your 'istory," said Curly, "you'd know she was left to sleep a 'undred years, and then it weren't no stinkin' tin what woke 'er, neither."

"Thing slipped," said Tim. "Have a biscuit."

"'Air o' the dog what bit me, I suppose. No fear. Not for this child. Slipped, did it? Slipped, indeed? Look 'ere mate. I bin in trenches up and down this old world afore you was born, nor thought of. I've seen bad places and good places, but blind me sideways if I ever yet struck such a rowdy, clumsy trench as this is."

He rubbed his eyes with his knuckles, and prepared to lie down again, but a shell, landing in the next bay, shook the trench.

"An' those beggars over there," he went on, "runs you pretty close makin' disturbances."

There were other troubles in store. Soon

afterwards four or five men came running up the trench. There was anxiety on their faces, for they wondered whether they would be in time. They dared not stop to take breath, for every moment was precious to them. It was a small party, a fact which would have thrown a glamour over them in the eyes of an onlooker. There was the eternal romance of the forlorn hope in the incident.

"Get a blinkin' move on," growled the second man.

"Go and lead yourself then," said the leader. "I can't go no quicker. Fetch a motor, if you like."

"None o' your back chat."

"Who's back-chattin' now?"

"Cut it out, save your breath."

Sometimes an obstacle in their path accentuated a word in the most grotesque way. Progress became more difficult, and their anxiety increased.

"We got to do it. Must be in time."

In the direction in which they were making shells were falling. In fact, at that moment the shell that prevented Curly from going to sleep again had burst.

"They may be blown to bits already," said the leader.

They rounded a traverse. There was a cry

of dismay from the leader. The others crowded after him.

"Too late," he said. "Too late."

"Gone West. Na poo," said the second man.

"Strewth!" said the third.

They gazed, panting, in front of them.

Then Tim came round into the bay.

"It's all right," he said. "We've got 'em.

"Well, what the flamin', perishin', holy—"

"Couldn't get along to tell you."

"Couldn't Hell! We got 'ere right enough."

"Well, what's your grouse?"

"Yes, but—"

"Anyone would think," said Tim, "that your damned bread was a matter of life and death. Couldn't you trust us to cover the stuff up safely as soon as this racket started?"

The argument continued for some time, until a big shell blew in a piece of the trench. Then the parties co-operated in the work of re-building. The precious bread was safely hidden away.

While they worked Curly sang contentedly:

"My old man's a fireman,
What do you think of that?

'E wears gorblimey trousers,
An' a little gorblimey 'at.
'E wears no blinkin collar
Round 'is blasted throat.
My old man's a fireman
On an Elder-Dempster boat."

The youngest subaltern heard the song. A few days afterwards the following version issued from the Company Commander's dug-out :—

" Mon vieil homme est homme de feu,
N'est-ce pas à propos?
Il porte des gorblimey pantalons
Et un petit gorblimey chapeau.
Il ne porte jamais,
Un collet comme il faut,
Mon vieil homme est homme de feu
Sur un Elder-Dempster bateau."

CHAPTER VIII.

LIFE ON THE SOMME FRONT.

"Come back!" they shouted. "Come back!"

He paid no attention to them, but crawled on through the mud, pausing now and then when a shell burst near him.

The Germans had hit one or two of the wiring party, and the night, a moonless one, had become lit with flares. One man was lying out by the wire, badly hit.

Curly crawled on.

"Who's copped it?" asked Tim.

"One of 'is pals, likely."

He wormed his way up to the wire, and it was an anxious time for those in the trench. Sooner or later a flare would surely show him up. For a few seconds now and again No Man's Land was illuminated, and Curly lay prone on his stomach and very still. He got hold of the wounded man and began to bring him in. Before he reached the trench he

was seen, and a machine gun opened fire on him. But somehow he escaped the bullets. Eager hands helped him and his burden into the trench. He himself was exhausted, but would not show it.

"Real good work, mate," said Tim; "but what made you do it?"

"I dunno."

"Yes, but—"

"That's all there is to it, son."

"But why did you do it?"

"'Cause they was firin' at 'im, I suppose."

"Firing at him? It was you they fired at, I should think."

"Couldn't see me. Any'ow, if they did, it was pretty poor shootin'."

Nobody could get anything further out of him, except that just before he sat down and closed his eyes he murmured "There's things what makes a chap do things."

That night they sat in a damp shelter and talked.

"Leave 'll be great, won't it?" said Tim.

"You bet it will—when it comes."

"I shall go and sniff round the old shop," said Tim. "Probably have a look at blokes getting shaved. There'll be walks with the wife. All kinds of things I'll want to buy her. What'll you do Curly?"

"Oh, reckon I'll just 'ump my pack 'ome to Camden Town, put myself in an arm-chair, shove my feet on the fender, light the old clay, an' tell the tale to the old woman. Sleep, after that. Expect I'll take 'er out a bit, too. 'Olborn Empire touch. We allus go there. That's where I met 'er. She sold fags and things, as I've told you; an' then I got sold myself. That was all before you kids was thought of. Wish we could get leave together, Tim, livin' as near as we do. Easy ride by 'bus. What'll you do, Dick?"

"I shall go right away for Bristol. First thing'll be to pop the question. After that it'll be simply a question of cramming the time full o' things, taking the girl out. All that."

"You're about the age to go breakin' 'earts, Dick," said Curly. "Seven days' leavin's. What O!" and he winked.

"Well," said Dick, "there'll be one or two girls glad to see me, I'm not denying."

"And you, O'Hanlon?" said someone.

"Well, I think I shall just have a good rest," said O'Hanlon.

"Go to any theatres?"

"Very likely."

"With—er—I suppose you'll be with your wife."

"No," said O'Hanlon. "No. I'm not married." His face clouded over, and not long afterwards he made an excuse to leave them to go and clean his rifle. It was a silly excuse, but the men were sorry he had been there.

"Oughtn't to have asked him," said Tim. "I expect things are wrong between him and the girl I saw him with."

"Seem to remember," said Curly, "something about true love not runnin' smooth."

"He's a quiet chap," said Tim. "We'll never understand him much, to my thinking. His life's all different from anything we chaps know."

"He ought to be an officer," said Dick.

"He tries damned 'ard to live our life now, anyway," said a man with a lean face.

Perhaps they did not understand him. Perhaps it was because he could not be as happy as they. He was only one instance of those who left their dreams for the business of war, young men with the promise of life before them, idealists who found the highest ideal of all in sacrifice and service.

Later on, towards dawn, Tim had stretched his legs out and settled himself for a sleep. He was disturbed by a man climbing over him. He looked up and saw Curly.

"What do you want?" he said.

"Bombs," said Curly.

"What for?"

"Play marbles with, o' course."

"They're behind that blanket."

"Good."

He moved along, and came back with a bag full of bombs.

"Comin'?" he asked.

"Where to?"

"You're as full o' questions as a Medical Board."

Tim became annoyed.

"Well, how am I to know," he said, "what kind of ruddy nonsense you've got in your nozzle? Coming here waking people up. What's the mystery?"

"What does a bloke usually do with a bomb?"

"Seen some Gers?"

"No. Zulus."

"Where are they?"

"You can see 'em quite near from the sap-'ead down 'ere. They're makin' a forward machine gun emplacement or something o' that sort. They're in a shell-'ole."

"Well, why didn't you say so?"

"Thought you 'ad a bit o' gumption."

Two or three men followed Curly. They came to the sap-head, and he whispered to

them to look over straight ahead. They looked and drew in their breath:

"Looks as if there was something doing," said Tim.

"Well I didn't bring you 'ere to tell you pretty stories," answered Curly.

Heads were just visible in a shell-hole. It was not quite dark enough to hide them. The Germans had gone on working too late.

The party crept out of the trench, one after the other, and Tim had a pleasant thrill. This was something out of the ordinary. They moved an inch or two at a time, and found a gap in their wire. Speed was essential. Any moment they might be seen from the German trench. Curly raised his hand from the ground and they stopped. They threw their bombs.

It was a complete surprise. Two of the Germans were killed. Two others surrendered and brought a wounded man with them. The German trenches took up the alarm. Their machine guns traversed in wild excitement. Curly made a sign to the advancing Germans to hurry. The wounded man impeded them. Finally they were both shot from their own trench, and a whizz-bang blew the wounded man's head off his shoulders.

Curly and his party got back to the trench

as quickly as they could. One man was hit in the arm.

The disturbance quieted down after a little while, and Tim lay down to sleep. Once more he was roused, and by Curly as before.

"What the hell do you want now?" said Tim.

"Bombs," said Curly. "And just cut out all that questioning. They're sendin' more men out to work on that 'ole. Don't want no rifle fire. That'll turn 'em back. Wait till they're in the trap."

Adventures of this kind relieved the monotony of trench life with its perpetual bombardment. Once Tim was sent back with a few other men to get water. It was a moonless night when they started off, laden with petrol tins, their rifles slung over their shoulders. The Lance-Corporal had a small pocket-torch, which he used cautiously when they were far enough away from the German lines.

"Now then, Aladdin," said Curly, when they came to a difficult bit of ground, "where's that wonderful lamp o' yours we've 'eard so much about?"

They passed from a disused trench out to the open country and found a rough track where the mud had been churned into a bog by the traffic of war. Tim said it was the

worst bit of ground since Festubert. Once he pulled up just in time to avoid falling into a deep chasm.

"Don't go down in the mine, dad," said Dick.

"Let it come up to you," added Curly.

From time to time a "crump" burst with a deep cough near them, leaving another chasm and a ball of smoke. They came to their well. Once there must have been a garden round it. They deposited their tins and sat down to recover their breath.

"Dark, an' no mistake," said one man.

Curly mopped his forehead with the back of his hand. Near the well there was an R.E. dump, and in the cellar of a destroyed house close to it some sappers were having a sing-song. Their voices, pitched low, came mysteriously out of the darkness and desolation.

The cans were filled and they started on their way back, taking greater care to pick their path and to keep clear of pitfalls and rusty wire. The last part of their journey had to be made across the open, and a flare went up in the German lines at an unlucky moment for them. They stood perfectly still and upright, but the sudden activity of a machine gun told them that they had been seen. They flopped to the ground and began

to crawl as well as they could with the water to look after. Progress was very slow until Tim had his inspiration. He crawled up from his place in the rear and whispered his idea to the lance-corporal, who approved of it. They put their cans down and went on as fast as they could to their own lines. Tim, Curly, Dick, and the lance-corporal stayed behind. They were to bring the cans along, two by two. Four men stood more chance than a crowd.

They each made three journeys. By this time the machine gun was firing wide of them. It had lost them. All went well until the last journey, when a whizz-bang burst near them, followed by others. There was a sound like a stone flung violently against a roof of corrugated iron. Both the cans that Tim was carrying were hit, and the water poured out. He stopped the holes as well as he could with handfuls of mud. Curly helped him. The other two crawled on.

"Think we'd better rush for it," said Tim.

"You're right, mate," said Curly. "They've got us taped."

"Got your cans all right?"

"Yes."

"Ready, then?"

"Yes."

"Up!"

They scrambled up and started to run towards the trench, the cans clanking as they went. Things flicked close to their heads with a venomous spitting sound. A whizz-bang threw the mud up. A slab of wet earth struck Tim on the cheek. He staggered and cursed. He was glad when they slithered down into the trench.

"Near thing," he said. "Don't think I'll try any more patent schemes."

"An' I've gone and cut my 'and on one o' them rotten tin things," said Curly. "An' all for water. Water! I ask you! WATER!"

Week after week, month after month, Tim carried his life in his hands. It was a tale of attack and counter-attack, violent bombardment, deadly barrages; a tale of friends lost, and a gradual acceptance of the soldier's fatalism. Life seemed to hold nothing but this see-saw, trench to bivouac, bivouac to trench. Occasionally there were billets. Tim began to wonder if there had ever been a time before this, if he had ever done anything but this. Putney was so very far away. Looking into the future he could see nothing but trenches and billets, shell-holes and dug-outs and sunken roads. He no

longer thought of leave. So often his hopes had been dashed. In and out of the line. In and out of the line.

They talked, the men of his section, of nothing but war now. They were obsessed. It seemed the only way to pass the evenings, to sit round in a group and tell stories. Dick did most of the story-telling, for he had been in the very first day of the Somme battles. He could talk of the July days and August days of the Somme, and he had a vivid way of telling a story. He told them about that famous July 1st, when it all began. He described the preliminary bombardment. He even remembered the south-westerly breeze of that morning. He described the lifting of the guns at 7.30, and how the sudden silence after a week of uproar made one dizzy. Then the ranges were lengthened, and for twenty-five miles little figures scrambled out into No Man's Land.

He said the waiting had been horrible. He had wanted to shout, to do anything. His Battalion was at the northern end of the line, and he told how the Germans put down an effective barrage on the British trenches there at the very onset. The attacking troops had to form up on the open ground behind. He told of that gigantic mine that had taken

seven months to construct, and how at 7.30 it threw Hawthorn Redoubt high into the air; how he advanced with dust in his eyes and ears, stumbling along blindly, until he found himself in the German trenches and realised that the first line was in British hands. It made him think that the whole vast attack was going well. He was convinced of it and became elated. One judges the whole war by what occurs in one's own tiny sector.

They went on, and the sun shone down on them. Then, glancing sideways, he saw great gaps in the line, and men falling. From the rear came incessant machine gun fire. He did not know till afterwards that in many places the Germans had lain low until the British had passed, and then, dropping a barrage to keep off the British supporting troops, had crawled up from their lairs with their machine guns.

He came to another trench and fought for many hours, not knowing where he was and how the day went. He was driven from one corner to another.

"I reckon," he would end, "that someone's got to do that sort o' work in these new wars. We didn't do much for ourselves, but we kept lots of Gers busy and so helped the rest o' the line."

That was the kind of talk they held round a brazier or in their tents. Names that everyone knows glittered in and out of their tales. Mametz, Fricourt, Montauban, Mucky Farm, Delville Wood, High Wood, Bernafay Wood, Longueval, and the famous Windmill of Pozières. Many of the men had fought at Pozières, and Tim began to know, almost as if he had been there, Tulloch Corner, the road that ran out of Contalmaison Wood into Pozières, the Water Tank, the Chalk Pit on the right of the old German trenches, and the maimed trees on each side of the straight Albert-Bapaume road.

Tim went through a good deal of this kind of fighting. He made the acquaintance of the foul-smelling woods; he saw the tanks in action; he lived in shell-holes, and saw how a trench can be gradually evolved out of disconnected holes. One incident stood out vividly in his mind. There had been a British advance, ending in a rough and tumble fight. Parties became isolated. Companies lost touch with each other, so that each man had to find what shelter he could. That was how the new line began. They had to dig cautiously, taking care not to throw the earth out, for they guessed that snipers were waiting and they did not quite know where the Germans had got to or what

they were planning. The barrage rained down far behind them.

Tim, working away in his hole, heard a voice. He put his head up warily.

"Got a tin opener?" said the voice.

"Curly!"

"Tim!"

"You?"

"Yes, me!"

"Where's Dick?"

"Dunno."

"How did you get here, Curly?"

"Druv up in my Rolls. 'Ow did you?"

"I've been crawling up for hours. Dick and me missed the rest back yonder. Pretty hot, isn't it?"

"Might be worse. Where the 'ell are we?"

"Well, we're here, wherever it is. Doesn't make much odds."

"That's a bright remark, son."

"You aren't a walking map o' the war yourself, you know."

"Is your 'ole deep, Tim?"

"Pretty fair. Yours?"

"Not very. Don't smell like a scent shop, neither. Bin some dirty work 'ere, I reckon."

Behind them they heard a slight noise. They turned and saw several men crawling up. They dispersed and dropped into shell-holes.

"Good," said Curly. "'Ere comes the rest."

"Yes, and there's Dick."

"Must 'ave come through the barrage. Don't talk so loud, mate."

"Soon be dark, now. We'll have to keep our eyes skinned then, all right all right, and no mistake."

Presently a message came straggling down the irregular line from man to man.

"Ned's in touch with B. Company," said the message.

An officer with a bandage over one eye crept along behind the holes. He told the man on the left to spread out and link up with another Company, and to pass down word when they were in touch. Meanwhile they went on digging, and some semblance of a continuous trench emerged. It was narrow and shallow and quite roughly made, but it was shelter at any rate. Nobody knew when the guns might not be turned on their work. The silence in front, when the barrage was withdrawn, was ominous. Tim felt "jumpy." He was almost relieved when there was a sudden burst of machine gun fire ahead, and dark figures came quick over a crest of ground. The British sent up flares, and every man saw to his rifle.

It seemed to Tim very little time before the

Germans were right on top of him. There had been no time to bring wire up, and the trench was unprotected and not even joined up everywhere. He fired whenever he could see a German distinctly enough, and once he used his bayonet with all his strength. He saw a face and a body poised to spring, and he lunged. A rifle dropped by his side and he saw the man topple over and lie still. Then his nerves broke down. He thought that the others had withdrawn and that he was alone among the Germans. He saw them dragging machine guns into holes on his left. He lay still, paralysed with fear, until he heard a voice behind him.

"Come on," said Ned. "We better kind o' rally up there."

"Where's the rest?"

"Gawd knows."

They crawled off, picking up other men on the way, one or two of them wounded.

They found an old crater and clambered into it.

Ned kept watch while the others took counsel.

"Seems to me something's got to be done," said Tom.

"Fat lot o' use that suggestion," said Tim.

"Anyone got a brighter idea?" said Joe.

(They always called him Joe because his name was Antony Barrisdale.)

"We got to find out where the hell we are," said Tom.

"Believe I 'eard voices on the left," Ned whispered.

"Look here," said Tim. "One of us must go out and have a look round. Rotten job, but someone must do it. Better try over on the left where Ned heard voices."

"But who'll go? Any volunteers?"

"Me," said Tim, before anyone could speak.

"Me," said Tom.

"Me," said Ned.

"Me," said Bob.

"I," said Antony Barrisdale, conscious of grammatical superiority.

"No good all going," said Tim.

"Draw lots," said Ned.

"You've 'it it," said Bob.

One of them produced an envelope and tore it into squares. Tom found a grubby pencil. He left four squares blank. On the fifth he wrote "Go," hunching his knees up to make a table to write on. A shell burst near.

"Hurry up," said Tim.

Bob held out his tin helmet and the papers were dropped in and shuffled round. They crouched down and Tim lit a match. They

reached out their hands to draw.

" Blank, mine," said Tom.

C-r-r-r-rump!

A torrent of earth. Bob was bowled over and the helmet buried deep under the mud.

" That's torn it," said Tim.

" It's an omen," said Bob.

" Clear as daylight," said Joe.

" What are you getting at?" said Tim.

" Why, we all go now."

" Of course."

" There's something in that," said Tim.

So they all went.

Ahead of them the shells were falling thick. They could see by the flashes, as they burst, figures crawling towards the German lines.

" Shelling their own beggars out," said Tim, and laughed.

They came to the trench which they had begun to make. There were many German wounded and dead lying about and some of their own men, who had been taken prisoners and were now free again.

Tim took up the spade and started to dig.

" 'Ow about that tin-opener?" said a voice, and Curly slid down beside him.

" Where you been?" said Tim.

" 'Ere. Prisoner o' war, I reckon."

" Shake, mate."

They shook.

One of Tim's last memories of the Somme at that period of the war was connected with the German retreat from Bapaume and Péronne. The men were resting in a little village. Curly was asleep. Tim was sitting smoking when he was called to the door of the barn by O'Hanlon. There was a large crater in the middle of the street, and most of the houses were in ruins; but O'Hanlon was pointing to a field over the way.

"Bit of a mess they've made of it," said Tim.

"That field," said O'Hanlon, "was an orchard. Shells never did that. There's not a shell hole there. It's been systematically destroyed. The trees have been cut down, murdered."

Now Tim had been fond of Kew Gardens in a subconscious kind of way. It had a sentimental interest for him. He regarded trees as something to put seats underneath, little seats in pairs. He and his Meg had often sat in the London Parks on those green chairs, discussing their future.

"They do look unnatural, sort of," he said.

"That's not the point," said O'Hanlon.

"No," said Dick, who had joined them. "You London blokes look on trees as

ornaments. They're food, too, mate. Orchard, that's what it was, right enough. Fruit would have grown there. Mad trick," he added.

When Curly woke they showed him the field and told him about it.

"Always was a romantic bloke, me," said Curly. "But some'ow one doesn't notice trees much till they aren't there. Suppose it's like that with most things a chap's fond of. But this field kind o' brings things 'ome a bit. Never seen 'em lying about like that before. Seen plenty done in by shells, but not like that. There used to be an apple tree when I was a boy. Somewhere in Surrey we was. Used to shin up it. The old dad used to sell the apples. Made a tidy bit that way. An' there was birds, too, singing like 'ell in the mornin' when I woke up. P'raps there was kids used to play about round that lot. Girls won't 'ear the wind in 'em no more. Girls like that, they do. My old woman, now, when she gets poetic, like, she says to me, 'Old un,' she says, 'Ark at the wind in the trees, like the seaside.'"

"There's accidents," he went on later, "in war. We all know that. You can't 'elp a shell runnin' a bit wild now and then. But them what goes deliberately 'ackin' trees to

bits, why they ain't human, to my way o' thinkin'. There won't be no kids climbin' them trees, and no couples spoonin' and talkin' soft stuff. An' it's all stinkin' spite, 'cause we made 'em go back."

"It is that," said Tim.

O'Hanlon, in a corner of the barn, was writing. He had listened to every word the others had said. So it is that one stumbles on poetry, if only one will recognize it.

CHAPTER IX.

LEAVE, AND AFTER.

The Battalion was moved from Picardy into Artois to recuperate, and here, in billets behind the lines, a rumour of leave found them. For long Tim had tried to put all thought of it out of his mind. He had been through so much that he could not believe the news. He was afraid to believe it, for his nerves were still under the influence of horrible months on the Somme. He had not been able to forget; in fact, as his experiences there grew further away, so did they stand out more vividly. His mind was still bruised. So that when they told him, he wanted more than anything to be alone, to think about it.

He walked into the streets of an old town. The lamps were lit and wove fantastic patterns on face and shutter and sidewalk. In the Market Place a Royal Artillery band was playing. The music had such an effect

on him that he passed out of hearing, making his way to the Divisional Canteen, where he found many of his own Company. The men were reading papers or sitting at wooden tables, eating rolls and butter, sardines, or tinned fruits. Some were smoking long cheroots. A new-comer, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth and his cap tilted back, sat down at the piano.

"Give us 'Swanee River,' Stan."

"Play the 'Long Trail,' mate."

"Can you do 'Er 'Eart is a Rosebud'?"

Stan played most of the popular favourites, and the men roared the refrains. Occasionally a man looked up from his paper moved by some melody. Perhaps he saw again a limelit revue girl, tawdry scenery, artificial smile, or a dim-lit parlour and a young girl at the piano, or a restaurant full of laughing faces and lights.

Tim listened for a while, leaning against the wall; then, still restless, he walked out into the street. He found the Cathedral, rising above a mass of mean buildings. From inside there came the sound of an organ. Tim walked up the broad, gray, stone steps and through a swinging side-door, looking up as he went at the figures carved over the porch. Inside, incense came to meet him. He selected a chair and knelt down on a small

red hassock. The scraping of chair legs on the stone floor roused him from his thoughts, and he saw the black-clad townsfolk rising to their feet. Then there was some singing. Tim wanted the service to go on, never to stop. He had an idea that he was living one of those short hours that one looks back on afterwards with regret, knowing that they do not return. He felt no religious impulse. He knew only that inside here it was quiet and peaceful, that he was shut off from the world for a moment, cast away on a small island of time.

He was the last to leave, and it was late when he came out. The cafés were closing and men were going back to billets. A sign-board creaked in a rising wind; in the distance the guns murmured, like the muffled drum accompaniment to a Nocturne.

Tim took off his puttees and prepared for the night, not talking much. Silence settled on the town. One by one the men fell asleep. Tim lay awake, listening to the guns, and then he, too, lost consciousness. Only O'Hanlon in his corner lay with open eyes, thinking of leave.

Curly was the first of the section to go, and a few days later Tim was told that his name was next on the list. And one afternoon he found himself actually armed with

a pass. He was in the trenches at the time. He said goodbye to his friends and hurried down the communication trench. A sniper's bullet warned him that death would stalk him to the very end. He came out on to the road and passed crumbled houses where a British battery was at work. He wanted to stop and tell everybody his news. He wanted to shout it aloud. A lorry thundered along behind him. He turned round and hailed it. The driver told him to jump up.

"I'm going on leave," said Tim. "Glorious!" he added.

"What O!" said the lorry driver.

The lorry rattled along over the cobbles. They passed parties of men going to and from the line. In a village a labour battalion was working on a road. Tim tried to think, but he was very tired. His eyes kept closing, and only the repeated bumpings kept him from dozing. There were half-formed pictures in his brain all the time: arm-chairs, restaurants, bands, his wife, even a ridiculous barber's chair. At the entrance to the town he left the lorry and went to the station. He found that the leave-train did not start for some hours. A benevolent military policeman gave him the tip to be at the train early as there was always a great crush.

"Corner seat's a great thing on a long journey," said the policeman.

Tim walked from the station through crowded streets, and went into a dilapidated cinematograph theatre. The smoke and the heat made him too drowsy to watch the pictures, but he was aware of laughter rippling round him, breaking against his reveries. When he came out it was dark, and a chill wind flickered up and down. He wandered about idly and finally turned into a café near the station. He pushed his way up to the counter. There were baskets of hard-boiled eggs, thick slabs of bread and butter, cups of coffee, and sardines floating in tomato-tinged oil. The latter he avoided, in view of the sea journey. Everyone seemed to be talking at once. Tim made his way over the sandy floor to a dark corner and sat down at a table with a gunner.

"You for Blighty?" said the gunner.

"Sure thing. You?"

"Yes. London."

"Me, too."

"I'm London first and then Devon."

Tim passed on the hint about being early at the train, and together they went out of the café. When they arrived at the station they found that crowds of men had anticipated them. Their passes were

examined. Then they sat down on the platform, lit their pipes, and waited.

"Glad it's not cold," said Tim.

"You'll wish to Gawd it was when you get shut up in them carriages," said the gunner.

Presently a very long train crept lazily and disdainfully into the station. Its whole attitude suggested a kind of cynical disapproval. It was aloof from these human emotions. What was so thrilling for these eager men on the platform was really so commonplace, just an every-day incident from a train's point of view.

They packed themselves into the carriages, and Tim was lucky enough to secure a corner seat. He piled his rifle and equipment on the rack, turned up his great-coat collar to keep out the noise, and made ready to go to sleep. When the train started he was dreaming that the Quartermaster-Sergeant with a serviette under one arm was issuing peaches and cream. The Platoon Commander, washing his hands in the air, bowed slightly and asked if there were any complaints. He was on the point of handing the latter a one franc note when somebody's foot on his chest woke him with a start. He blinked, rubbed his eyes, and removed the foot as courteously as possible. Through the

open window there came a breeze full of rumours of the sea. The train was moving fast. Clumps of trees and houses would leap suddenly out of the darkness and then vanish. Tim dozed off again. Next time he woke it was growing light. He lit a cigarette, and began to think things over. Leave! What a time he would have! All the things there were to do. Perhaps one had to take life's bad times to appreciate the good times afterwards.

Dawn came shyly. They passed cross-roads. A muscular woman leaned over a gate. Girls waved their hands. One of them shouted something. Probably "Bon voyage," thought Tim. The train slowed down at a wayside station. After that dunes met them, leading them down to sand-flats. There was a tang of salt wind. Tim had a glimpse of the sea. He dug his teeth into a biscuit, watching the sun on waves that broke into orange and gold.

The men detrained and stood for some time in fours on a broad, open space. The boat with its leaning black funnels was temptingly in sight, but Tim was anxious. Very often, when there was a larger batch of men than usual for leave, the surplus had to spend the night in a rest-camp and go across the next day. Tim was in the rear, and the

suspense was anything but pleasant. The column moved forward, and neatly dressed women came into sight. They were serving out coffee and sandwiches from a stall. Tim gulped his coffee and moved on. He realized that he was safe from the rest-camp. He found himself on the quay. He kept close behind the man in front of him, and in single file the men came to the gang-plank. An officer, in the custom-house fashion of pre-war days, was seizing on those who had forbidden souvenirs to declare. He had quite an antique shop of German bayonets and fragments of shell behind him.

Tim, with his rifle slung and his paraphernalia on his back, stepped on to the deck and felt the slight motion of the boat under him. He began to realize that it was no dream, that he was really and truly bound for England. He stowed away his pack and rifle against the gunwale and looked round. Life-belts were being served out. A preliminary scream from the siren sent the gulls wheeling and circling in all directions.

"We're for it at last," said a man close to him.

"Hard to believe," Tim answered.

"Don't go puzzlin' over it," said the man. "Take it as it comes, same as everything else. Strange times these."

Another scream from the siren and the boat put out slowly. Tim, leaning over the rail, had again the desire to shout aloud. He envied the self-possession of the older men. On the quay girls put down their baskets and waved. An old French sailor, his hands on his hips, gazed after the boat. The figures grew smaller. The gilt lettering over an ugly, massive hotel faded, became illegible. They were clear of the harbour, and the boat gathered speed. Tim had a salt taste on his lips.

"Going to be a bit choppy," he said.

There was no reply and he looked down at his side to find the man who had spoken to him sleeping soundly. It reminded him of Curly.

"Bet he's an old regular," he said to himself, "they seem to sleep anywhere at any time."

He moved about the deck, joining a group here and there. There were men from every part of the Empire. It was a kind of sample packet of the British Army, like mixed biscuits, Tim thought. An Australian with a lazy twang was chatting to a Lowland Scot; two Sussex farm-boys argued with a Welshman, who rapped out staccato phrases; the musical brogue of Cork and the buzzing speech of Cornwall were allied. Tim

marvelled at the Idea that had drawn all these men from their occupations, to stand side by side.

An exclamation near him about half-an-hour later made him look ahead, where several fingers were pointing. And there, a deeper gray than the sea, fantastic and mirage-like, was the coast of England. A big white hospital ship passed quite close, on its way to France. But Tim could only spare it a second. His eyes were fixed on the gray line ahead. The sun, coming through a rift in the clouds, turned the sea to green, and for the third time he wanted to shout.

Presently the land ahead grew clear. White cliffs gleamed in the sun. Beyond were fields and woods and hedges, blurred as yet, hesitating to become real. The men crowded to the rail, eager, like explorers who come upon an unknown land. There was a bustling on board. Packs were adjusted and rifles slung. The boat glided into harbour. An A.M.L.O. came out of a little hut with papers in his hand. There was shouting and a cable was flung, caught, and made fast. The gang-plank was lowered and the men filed off. They formed up and marched up to the platform singing a music-hall song. So, after a great adventure, Tim came home again.

It was a quick journey to London. The train dashed with a shrill whistle through a tunnel, flung little stations aside contemptuously, and came to the untidy beginnings of London, the first dingy houses with unkempt back-gardens decorated with clothes-lines. But it was all beautiful to Tim.

Tim's heart was pounding when he got out of the train. He tried to walk as if he had been used to moments like this all his life. And then suddenly he was through the gates, and there were arms round his neck.

"Tim! Oh, Tim!" said Meg.

Tim's cheek was wet when she withdrew her face; they walked arm in arm out to the station yard, and turned down to the Tube.

"Good old Victoria Station," said Tim.

"And how about me?" said Meg.

"You, dear? Why, there's not words invented for you. You—Oh, well, I *am* glad to be back."

That leave was wonderful to Tim. It was not what he did. It was just being there at home again with Meg, doing things he had done so long ago. That was what made it memorable. He could almost forget his uniform, almost forget awful nights and days, when he and she walked together or sat and talked. And Curly called. That was

wonderful, too. The day before he was due to go back to France he came with his wife. They stayed to tea.

"Can't some'ow believe I've 'ad 'im back," said Curly's wife.

"It's too good to be true, isn't it?" said Meg.

And Tim and Curly talked, their legs stretched out comfortably. And afterwards Tim always marvelled that they should have talked of the war. But they did. They remembered old jokes and songs. Somehow with Curly, thought Tim, one did not see the bad side of it all.

Another man called on them, too; a man named Worple, from Houndsditch, and amused them both.

"Reckon the war's broadened me a bit," he said. "Why, I used to think that Australians was chaps what walked about lassoin' things an' yellin' 'Cooee,' an' firin' revolvers. I thought Frenchmen talked like 'ell an' shrugged their shoulders, an' eat snails and frogs and things, an' sang the mayonnaise. I'd never seen a Portugee, and never should 'ave, neither. I thought Yanks walked in ragtime and was all millionaires and comedians. An' another thing, I thought we was the only lot what could fight. We chaps just wanted our minds stretchin'.

We'd never seen things raw; real sufferin', I mean. What's the good of Ententes and things if you never seen the blokes you're ententing with? I'm goin' to 'ave my kid taught foreign stuff, languages and things."

Meg and Tim had a last evening together. They stayed at home and talked, but it was difficult. It was like that day so far off when Tim said goodbye on his final leave. There were long stretches of silence between their talk, and each one would speak rather quickly and inconsequently. Meg was up early next morning to give him his breakfast. She did not come to the station with him. She heard the door bang, as on that other occasion, and once more he was gone. So short a time she had seen him, and so little they seemed to have said or done. And now time would begin to go slowly again.

But for Tim time went quickly. He was snatched, as it seemed to him, out of her very arms into the clamour of guns in a flash of time. He was sent straight up to the line, and found the Battalion in a noisy place. He could hardly believe, as he stood on the firestep, looking out to the German trenches, that leave had not after all been a pleasant dream, insubstantial. Ahead of him the horizon flamed and flashed in the old familiar way. Shells sobbed over, and the world

trembled. Never had he known such a bombardment.

The Company was ordered to cover the withdrawal of men who had held their bit of trench until they could hardly stand; it was a critical point in the line. There was small chance of food coming up through such a barrage.

The trench was plastered with shells of every calibre and swept by gas before the German infantry masses came across No Man's Land. Their first attempt was a failure, and they settled down to exhaust the British by shell-fire. They played a waiting game, hoping for the psychological moment when there should be no more effort left in the defenders. Tim saw that it was to be a test of endurance. He crouched against the walls of the trench. Once, when it seemed that his head would burst open at the fury of the storm round him, he prayed strange incoherent words. Hour after hour he waited, convinced that leave had only been a dream, some trick of fate, until the stage had been set for this masterpiece. Curly, beside him, said "It might be worse." How could it be?

He opened his iron rations.

Towards the middle of the second night the world seemed to be splitting to pieces. It was

the moment when the bombardment is at its intensest, before the guns lift. The storm passed, leaving the remnant of the defenders dazed and stupid. They scrambled up to line the crumbled parapet, resting their rifles on slashed sandbags.

"All the Lewis guns gone west," someone said.

"All the more work for rifles," said Curly, with a snarl.

The Germans left their trenches. A steady fire met them, and they wavered, and then reformed. Still they faltered, and the men in the trenches wondered, until suddenly they saw, coming doggedly out of a broken wood on their left, the tanks. There was a shout.

"Don't forget Hell-fire Gully!"

The words rang down the line and were taken up. Nearly all the men knew Hell-fire Gully. That shout and the sight of the tanks were like wine to them. They fired on, seventeen of them, all that were left of the Company.

And then, from sheer exhaustion, Tim fainted.

When he came to they were bending over him. His face and head were wet. Curly held a water-bottle. The air was quiet.

"All right, son," said Curly. "They

done a bunk. Vermoozled. Tanks finished 'em off. Relief's comin' up."

Tim looked round at the trench. The men had crumpled up into heaps. Their clothes were all muddy and torn. Many had blood-stained bandages on.

"I'm pretty fair bust myself," said Curly. "O'Anlon's all right. 'E's up there. Poor old Dick's gone. Ned's got a nice one through the arm. Mr. Thwaites is all blown to bloody 'ell."

"Relief up!" came down the line half-an-hour later.

Tim got up weakly and then collapsed again. They carried him down in a stretcher, and Curly walked beside him. It was a slow march back with frequent halts, and the men were almost too far gone to raise their heads to the little cheer that greeted them in the village where they were to be billetted. They did not notice that another Battalion had turned out to see their return.

When Tim woke the next morning he felt as if someone in heavy boots had jumped all over his body, scraping the skin off.

It did not strike him that he had been making history.

CHAPTER X.

LA BELLE ETOILE.

La Belle Etoile stands back from the main road. One or two roads try to reach it but are lost before they find it. You must come to it by the narrow track that runs across the meadow, and even then you will not guess that it is an Estaminet until you see the sign-board. It is a brown house, quite unpretentious. If you stand in its small garden you can see the cobbled main road going straight between trees into a distance of field and spire. The surrounding country is flat and uninteresting, a monotony broken only by a wood or two, or a stream. All along the highway at intervals there are heaps of stones, and at each side of it a ditch overgrown with weed and grass. Day and night lorries and cars go by; Battalions, transport, sometimes cavalry, and motor-omnibuses loaded with infantry, moving in the wake of the war.

Here at the Estaminet with her mother lived Jacqueline, and this was her world. And here one evening Tim and Curly saw her for the first time. Bob had discovered the place and had inspected the sign, one golden star on a dark blue background.

The evenings were her busy time. Men at rest, as soon as they discovered this haven, made a habit of assembling there in their spare time. Inside they found things dear to the heart of a soldier, coffee and milk, omelettes, fried potatoes, innocuous French beer, cheap white and red wine—and Jacqueline. A man who knew some French once said that she herself was La Belle Etoile. When the war began she was puzzled at the strange visitors. Their ways were new to her, and she did not understand their language. She knew they were admiring her, but she could not tell what they were saying; this annoyed her, so that she set herself the task of mastering the elements of their language. Day by day she picked up fragments of phrases and words that fell from the tables, adding to her stock, until she could carry on with a man here and there one of those quaint conversations in bastard French and soldier-English which were to be heard all over the war areas of France and Belgium.

After that first evening Tim and Curly were always to be found there, and Bob was generally there before them. From the very first he had been interested in Jacqueline. He had begun by watching her, and liking her personal appearance. Only a lover can describe a woman. Perhaps Bob could have described Jacqueline. After a while they exchanged one or two commonplace sentences, and a friendship developed, until they liked each other more than they realized at first. Before the Battalion moved up to the line again these two had one long and serious conversation. Jacqueline had not disclosed her true feelings, perhaps she intended never to do so; but Bob, going straight to the point, revealed his own. Experience of the light-hearted ways of the British soldier had warned Jacqueline. She had heard stories of girls in other villages who had taken flirtations too seriously, tales of men who had gone away and forgotten; perhaps they had come back once to say it was all a joke. That did not matter if the joke were on both sides, common to both, but . . . So, when Bob said he meant it, she answered that "they all meant it for a time."

"You go away, forget," she said. "You see girls in more places, talk with them. How many do you say like this to?"

Bob protested, and maybe something in his steady eyes told her what she wanted to believe. Even then she may have been afraid.

"We see when you come back here," she said.

"Supposing there is no return," said Bob.

"You will be," she answered.

And they left each other with a handshake, and the Battalion went back to the line.

Jacqueline waited, reproaching herself. She knew the risk that she had taken. She knew that in war there were sudden transferences to other sectors, that there were many billets in this sector. There was death, too; or a wound that might take him to England and make him permanently unfit to return.

Other Battalions came to rest in the village, and Jacqueline would listen to conversations as a starving bird waits for crumbs. Sometimes at the mention of a regiment she would be all attention.

"You see them?" she would ask.

"Yes, I see 'em."

"But where?"

"Up 'Ulluch way, think it was."

"You see a man—ah—Comme ca," and she would indicate a certain height.

Someone would laugh.

"Big man, dark, black."

"There's thousands like that, you know."

"Only a one," she would murmur to herself.

The days were long for her. They were longer days than she had ever known, and each evening there was the same suspense. Perhaps he would come again. Perhaps he would come in, and hardly trouble to recognize her. She used to think of him talking to other girls, until she clenched her little fists. And then one day she heard that his Battalion had come to rest. They were in a village seven miles away. Pierrevaud, where Marie lived, Marie who was a famous beauty and had once been to Paris. He would see her, of course he would see her. He would say things to her, and how could even Marie help loving him when he began to talk. Even if he did not happen to see Marie for a day or two he would never think of walking seven miles.

She went about her work intensely miserable. She had had her chance, and refused it.

And then, one afternoon, he came in. There was nobody in the Estaminet. The men in the village were on parade. Her mother was cooking. Bob came in quickly and walked straight up to her. She could

do nothing. She just stood still, waiting.

"You were right," he said. "I've come back."

"But not here?"

"No. Pirrievo."

"And Marie? You see her?"

"I don't know nothing about 'er. Never 'eard of 'er."

Jacqueline was silent, to allow the wonder of it all to settle over her. Then, for the first time, she showed her true feelings.

The Battalion was only out of the line for a short time. But when they came back to rest a month later they found themselves in their old billets, and in the evenings a corner was always left for Bob. Tim and Curly made a diversion at the other end of the room, by starting a sing-song or telling a story.

One night Bob came in later than usual. His short hair had been vigorously brushed, his nails cut, and his clothes were extraordinarily clean. He went to his corner.

"Something in the wind to-night," said Tim.

Jacqueline, with woman's instinct, apparently knew that there was "something in the wind." Her hair was carefully arranged, and she was dressed as she usually dressed on Sundays. She walked over to Bob's corner.

"Now 'e's goin' to tell the tale," said Curly.

And he did.

He leaned his elbows on the table and looked unwaveringly into her eyes. She, from the other side of the table, returned his look, arms akimbo. She may have wondered again, now that the moment had come, whether he was not like the others who talked and went away and forgot. Sometimes she had been cold to him, to test him, but always he had persisted. Besides, one look at his face was a look into his heart. And Marie . . . . That he could ignore Marie was proof.

So she listened to the tale he had to tell.

O'Hanlon, at a table in the middle of the room with a half-written letter before him, was struck with the strangeness of it all—the popular songs, the letter home, the drinks, the swearing, and that old tale unfolding word by word and look by look. Romance with all these things for its background, romance that is nearest when it seems farthest away.

Tim and Curly, between songs, were discussing the last spell in the trenches.

"It was a bon raid."

"First class. Get an 'elmet?"

"Two."

" Didn't 'alf look scared when we came on 'em, did they?"

" Not half, they didn't."

In the corner the tale continued.

" 'E told me last night," said Curly, indicating Bob, " that 'e found more in 'er than girls 'e knew back 'ome. Said 'e was goin' to pop it to 'er soon. 'E wasn't kiddin'. 'E's a good un, old Bob."

" Funny getting served here by Mrs. Bob. Think she'll take him?"

" Dunno. She's a bit of a mystery. Moods an' things, I reckon. She's a fool if she don't."

Four men began to sing " No Rose in all the World." They sang that foolish love-song like hoarse-throated bandits threatening a captive. O'Hanlon smiled, and described it in his letter.

A transport driver came in and sat down.

" Where you bin?" asked Curly.

" Rations."

" You'll 'ave to wait a bit for your drink-o, 'less you can catch the old woman's eye. Young un's engaged."

" Ought to be by now," said Tim.

They looked over to the corner. Bob was standing up very straight and stiff. Jacqueline had lowered her head and was smiling. Bob smiled, too, after a while.

"That's put the tin 'at on it," said Curly.

"Thumbs up!" said Tim.

"After all, I don't see why not."

"No more do I. She's all right."

"Good for the Entente Cordial."

The next day it was in orders that the Battalion was to go back to the line in two days' time. After tea was over Tim and Curly stood at the door of their barn.

"It *is* peaceful 'ere."

"You're right chum."

They watched twilight, half mist and half darkness coming over the fields. Veil after veil of dusk made simple things mysterious. One could not tell how deep were the woods, how far back they went, as the trees grew darker and darker. Old women came out like bats, in their dark clothes, and fastened shutters. A dog's chain rattled, and a door slammed. A car, going along the main highway, drew up at the cross-roads, and started off again.

"Remember that scrap," said Curly, "up at them cross-roads? Ground all beaten up. That country must 'ave bin like this once."

A boy drove cows home along a rutty lane.

"No bon, Boche," he cried to Tim and Curly.

Even the unresting guns seemed to be sleeping; one heard only an occasional grunt

in the distance. There was a pond near the barn, and a wind bent the tall reeds in rythm, with a sound like deep sighing.

Presently they were aware of a droning.

"Gers, I bet," said Tim.

"After the old town again, like as not," said Curly.

They looked up, but deepening dusk made it impossible for them to see anything. The droning was going in the direction of spires that stood up dimly.

A chattering sound like a child clicking its teeth told them that the machines had probably fallen in with a British 'plane on its way home. They seemed to change direction slightly. Then there was the deep intonation of a bomb bursting. A ball of smoke rose on the edge of the village, blotting out some houses.

"In the village!" said Tim.

They ran from the barn. They crossed fields and scrambled over stiles. When they came to the main street a crowd had collected. People were standing round in a half-circle. Three small shops had been smashed to pieces. There was still a sharp smell in the air. A Frenchman was talking volubly, shaking a fist at the sky. On the ground, across a threshold strewn with bricks and brickdust and glass, lay a young woman with a deep

wound in her head. Round her the pathway was ploughed up, and by her side the M.O. knelt, binding up her head and her right cheek. Two orderlies were waiting to lift her on to a stretcher.

"It's Jacqueline," said Tim.

"I 'ad eggs off of 'er," one man was saying.

"She never let me pay for my milk."

"Just shoppin'. For us, as like as not. 'E says she'll pull through, 'e thinks."

"Gawd!" said Curly. "Where's Bob? Anyone seen Bob?"

"Afraid 'e's gorn."

"Gorn where?"

"'E was inside the shop. 'E was goin' to carry 'ome the things she'd bought. 'E'll be under all that stuff."

Tim and Curly and one or two others fetched spades and began to work at the débris. They found Bob under a weight of bricks and gray stone. There were splashes of blood on the stone.

"'Is 'ead's clean took off," said Curly.

Tim's mind was full of bitterness at the futility of such an end. If he could have spoken eloquently he would have talked about that story that was only just beginning for Bob and Jacqueline. From the talk of the men he gathered that these two had gone

together into the village to do some shopping. She had just come to the door of the shop when the bomb burst, and he was inside collecting the things they had bought and packing them into a basket. He must, at any rate, have died in the height of his happiness. But what would life be afterwards for her, if she lived?

The men still went to La Belle Etoile, but the gatherings were not of the old merry kind. Everyone felt constrained, and they went, more than for any other reason, in order to "keep the pot boiling" as they said, for the girl's mother, and to have news of Jacqueline herself. She recovered slowly from her wounds, but for a long time was in a state of nervous hysteria. Everyone was almost glad to go back to the line, for it was impossible to shake off the tragic atmosphere of the village.

Long afterwards, in another sector, Tim was sitting at a table in an Estaminet where some men of a Surrey regiment were talking. They were talking of girls, the various girls they had met since they came out to France, exchanging memories of Estaminets and shops and farmhouses.

"Remember the one at Aire, in the fruit-shop?"

"Yes, two sisters, wasn't there? Dark

girls. Mother hoverin' round all the time. Don't know whether she thought we was after the girls or the fruit."

"There was one in Bethune in a boot shop—."

"And how about the one with the queer name in Bray?"

"And that fair one in that place near Pop."

"A regular treat, she was. Cold as 'ell, though."

"Not so sure. Met a chap in Arras who—."

"There was a girl," said a man by the stove, "I saw once in a village. You wasn't there, Joe. I was attached to the engineers at the time. She was in a queer old Estaminet. Lived there with her mother. She didn't show herself much, but I saw her once. She had wonderful dark hair and a rare figure, and she was young, too; but she had a fair awful scar down the right side of her face. The skin was all drawn like an old woman's, and she was blind in her right eye. She was hit in a bombing raid, and she'd got a kind of nervous twitch. Couldn't keep still. And yet you could see that she must have been a rare beauty once, couldn't have been so long ago, either. She wore a ring, and a fellow told me there was some

sort of romance about her life. Queer how you run up against things like that, isn't it?"

And then Tim told them the story of Bob and Jacqueline. There was perfect silence when he had finished speaking, until one man said:

"It's 'ard to be made ugly all of a sudden like, but, come to think of it, I s'pose they all 'ave to lose their looks one day, even the finest of 'em. All these girls we bin talkin' about 'll be withered up one day. But I reckon that the quicker the years pass, the more pleased this one 'll be."

CHAPTER XI.

RAIN, AND MORE RAIN.

In a dugout, by candlelight, O'Hanlon was writing a letter.

"My very dearest," he wrote,

"I should have written before, but have not had much chance. We have been busy again lately, and have been in a good deal of fighting. You can't imagine how glad I was to get your last letter and to know that our foolish quarrel was at an end. It lasted much too long, and I knew you'd realize sooner or later that only a series of unlucky coincidences brought it about. I have been perfectly wretched all the time . . . .

I have been made a corporal, and am in charge of the liveliest section in the Platoon. Old Curly is in it, and Tim, the quaint barber fellow who spoke to us at tea that day. When

all this is over we must really take those fellows out. They're so amusing and such good chaps. . . . About the commission. As I said, my Company Commander has had long talks about it with me; also the Platoon Commander. Of course they keep advising me to apply for it, but I've stuck it out so far, and I really believe that the experience will be tremendously valuable after. One gets such a knowledge of men. As an officer one meets chiefly men of one's own class and ideas, and cannot really become intimate with these astonishing Cockneys and farmers and grocers. I'm sure you see my point of view, darling.

I've kept the best news till the end. I am coming back on leave, all going well, next week, probably about the middle of the week. I'll write again before that and tell you something more definite if I can.

I've got to go and see how the work's getting on.

Goodbye, sweetheart,

YOUR OWN."

He addressed his letter and climbed out into the trench. Rain had been falling steadily for some time, and the walls of

the trench were slimy and the duckboards mostly under water. He made his way along the trench, wondering when his next letter could arrive from England.

Meanwhile Tim, over his ankles in water, was scraping the mud off his rifle. An occasional whizz-bang came over from the German lines. Otherwise all was quiet.

A man came slithering round the traverse, a full sandbag slung over one shoulder and a can of water over the other:

"Make way, make way, can't yer?" he shouted.

"How many of you?" asked Tim, flattening himself against the wall of the trench.

"Me an' five bloomin' Army Corps. There was ten of us, but 'alf of 'em's dug theirselves in be'ind me. Stuck in the muck."

A second man appeared, breathing hard.

"Step short in front, damn your eyes."

"'Ark at 'im! Step short! Lucky if you step at all."

"Tim," said Curly, "strike me pink and blue if these beggars 'aven't gone an' brought up more water. As if we 'adn't got enough. Why don't you use your can to drain this blinkin' aquarium?" he shouted at the leader of the party.

"All up!" came from the next bay, and the procession moved forward again.

"Like yachtin' in the Alps. Look where you're comin', clumsy 'ound."

When the party had gone by work was resumed, only to be interrupted again by some men carrying up sandbags.

"Make way!"

"Oh, 'ell to you and your lot," said Curly.

"And to you."

"Can't you look where you're comin'?"

"Not with you in the road."

"Well, get on with it."

"Get into the side, then. No 'urry o' course."

Curly put one hand on his hip, with the other he leant on his spade.

"P'raps," he said slowly, "you'd like me to shove the trench out o' your way. What you want is a couple o' ruddy 'eralds in flamin' gold with bloomin' great trumpets to clear the earth for your 'ighnesses."

"Cut it out and let's come by, mate."

"Get on with it, then. *Some* on us 'ave to work, an' don't you forget it."

"Well, we're not exactly out on a picnic stunt. What the blazes do you think we're humping all this stuff for? It's not a hobby."

The leading man tried to squeeze his way through. The men in his rear were beginning to grow impatient.

"Send us a postcard when you're moving on, Charlie. Cut out the mothers' meeting business."

"You mind your own affairs. I can't go no faster."

The leader scraped by, under the sarcastic gaze of Curly and Tim. The rest followed. A few steps further on there was another halt. Two men had taken up a duckboard.

"Shove the drawbridge down," shouted Charlie.

"Wouldn't like us to make a new road for you, or any little thing like that, I suppose?"

"You build a road? You couldn't put a brick down straight, you couldn't."

The board was replaced and the men proceeded on their way.

"Friendly little lot, aren't we?" said Tim.

"It's only skin deep," answered Curly. "Chaps must let off steam some'ow or other up 'ere. Everyone loses 'is temper some time. Gawd! If it wasn't for bits o' tiffs an' the old Gers opposite I don't know what we'd do all the time."

That night the Platoon made a raid on the German trenches. It was a moonless

night. Hilton, who had been a gamekeeper, crawled out to investigate, and brought back a report that the German front line was lightly garrisoned. There were sentries and machine guns.

The artillery were informed that their barrage would not be needed. The bombers got ready quickly, and when all was in order they started, Hilton leading the way. When they were half-way across No Man's Land a flare went up. They lay very still, and Tim, his body pressed into the mud, could feel the beating of his heart. They went on again and presently came to the German wire. The first four men had just got through a gap in it when a German sentry fired. At the same time another flare went up. The leading men raced the remaining few yards to the trench and sprang in. The rest followed as fast as they could. The officer sent up a coloured signal, pre-arranged, and the artillery put down a barrage on the communication trench. The bombers stationed themselves outside the dugouts. Tim, with fixed bayonet, was detailed to guard the entrance to a particularly deep one. One of the bombers shouted down. There was no reply. He shouted again and was about to throw a bomb when two men came up hastily,

followed by two officers, their hands up.

In the trench itself there was a sharp fight, but the attackers had got possession of the machine guns, and it was soon over. The Platoon went back to its own trench with fourteen prisoners and three machine guns. For the remainder of that night the Germans were decidedly nervous. Flare after flare went up, and there were sudden wild bursts of firing on the left.

"Fritz'll be properly windy now," said Tim, as he crept under his water-proof sheet to sleep.

The British artillery bombarded now one part of the line, now another, with short intervals in between each bombardment. A perfect tornado of rifle bullets and shells replied from the German lines.

"Playin' 'em up proper this time, an' no mistake," said Curly, standing on sentry.

Once, during a lull, he could hear whistles being blown in the German trenches. A tree-stump in No Man's Land was subjected to a continuous rifle fire. At dawn a Company on the right executed another raid.

When the Battalion was relieved it marched back to a village that was new to it, and here Tim came across an old man living all alone on the outskirts. He seemed to be making his living by shaving the men. He

could talk English and explained to Tim that he knew England, that he had once served in a shop in Oxford Street, many years ago. One evening Tim went in to buy some writing paper, of which the old man had a small stock. He asked him how he came to be living there and if he found it lonely. It was very lonely, the old man said, and then he went on to explain that this was not his home. No. He had been driven from his home. His house had been blown to bits by night-raiding aeroplanes. But that had not been his first taste of the Germans. Tim drew him out, encouraging him to talk, and finally the old man told his story.

"In September, 1914, when the army of General Langle reoccupied the district of Vitry, I was liberated. I will tell you how the Boches came to my home. I lived in a small house with my wife. When the war began we did not somehow think that we could be in any danger. All was so peaceful round us. We went to bed as usual one night. I am a light sleeper. I was woken before dawn by the sound of a horse in the village street. My old wife still slept. I went to the door, and found that an officer of cavalry was warning the people to leave. 'They are coming,' he said. 'Make your

preparations to go.' I watched him pass up the street, knocking at the doors as he went. Soon afterwards French troops came through —cavalry, infantry, guns—making for the fields outside the village. 'The Boche is coming,' I said to my wife.' 'Eh bien!' she said. 'We remain here,' said I. 'But naturally, Pierre,' said my wife.

"A woman who kept the Estaminet next to our house came in. She was in tears. I told her to take courage. I told her our soldiers would return. While I was speaking with her I looked up the street, and in the distance I saw shells bursting. One could hear them. Many of our people fled in a panic. Others, who were calmer, stayed. We loved our homes too much to leave them like that to the *sales Boches*.

"I told Madame Hanneton, from the Estaminet, to stay with us. 'And leave them to drink my wines and syrups?' said she. 'Thank you, no, papa Pierre.' So she went back to put away her bottles and glasses.

"Then they came. Cavalry first, riding in all directions, scattering. After them, infantry; endless columns. They sang and laughed as they marched. I wished I was a young man; but there were no young men in the village, only a hunchback boy.

"Some of them halted in the village. Some officers made for the Mairie. Others arranged the quarters for the troops. No cottage escaped them. Six men came to our door, swept past us, and settled themselves in our room. I took my wife to the doorway. Madame Hanneton was standing on the threshold of her Estaminet. A German soldier was trying to kiss her. He made a horrible remark, and she struck him with the palm of her hand. For this they arrested her and took her down the street to the barn they had converted into a guardroom. The rest of them rifled her shop. Paul came in in the middle. He was over sixty, but very strong, and with a temper. He hit one of the men. It took six of them to overpower and bind him. Then they went out carrying their bottles. One man stayed. He called Paul filthy names in French, and spat at him. Then he poured paraffin over him till his clothes were soaked in it. He put a heap of paper close to Paul's fast-bound feet, and lit it . . . I discovered they were holding me from behind, the men in our cottage.

"We were accused of being Paul's accomplices. We were taken away to the barn. On the way we passed the drinking-trough. The soldiers were supporting a

woman against it. She was a young woman. The upper part of her body was mutilated and the water in the trough was tinged with red. The men were laughing.

"In the barn there was chaos. There were German defaulters there, some of them drunk. Madame Hanneton was struggling in a corner. Her clothes were torn, and she had a wound on her head. Her struggles ended in one scream. The hunchback boy was there too. They were laughing at him, and thumping his back with the butts of rifles. Such things I saw that I think I began to be a little unconscious. You understand that the things I have told you are not the worst. I cannot say the worst. It was terrible. At the end, before my senses went, I remember a body fell against me; I saw the blood. Afterwards our soldiers came back."

The old man told his story almost dispassionately, without any tendency to become dramatic. He made, by that, all the more impression on Tim, who sat quite quiet till the story was told. At the end Tim got up slowly, and gently shook the old man's hand.

He walked back to his billet, deep in thought. In the barn they were singing. He was relieved to be back among them.

He did not want to think any more. He wanted to lose himself for a while. When he came in a man was singing a solo. The refrain was taken up by everyone.

"Kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss . . . " it went, and there were all manner of impromptu noises, illustrative or purely high-spirited. Even O'Hanlon sang. Tim thought he looked happier than usual. Probably his leave, he thought.

" . . . But what I do prefer
Is a little bit of cucum—
I come, you come,
Little bit of cucum-ber."

Tim looked at the faces with the candlelight making shadows on them. When the singing paused for a moment he could hear the guns out in the night and the rain pattering on the roof, driving in sudden gusts against the wooden door.

"If you were the only girl in the world,
And I was the only boy-ee."

Tim knocked out his pipe.

"Curly," he said, "d'you think this business'll ever be over? D'you honestly think we'll ever go back and not have to come out and go through it all again?"

"Now then, now then," said Curly.

"You've been thinking again, that's what's wrong with you, my lad. Been moonin'. Feelin' kind of 'omesick, aren't you? I know all about it. It's this music too, all the singin'. It's a bad thing in a way. Makes you sort of sentimental. Can't 'ardly 'it on a tune that don't mean—oh, an 'ell of a lot to some cuss. It all starts 'im seein' things. Bad as drink, I reckon. Gets 'im all 'ung up, jumpy, till 'e fair 'ates bein' in all this. Don't you worry, son. There's a silver linin', you bet your boots; a great fat golden linin', I wouldn't be surprised. One day you'll look back on all this, an' you'll be fair stunned. You'll say to yourself—'Well, I didn't know as 'ow there was all that in it.' Mark my words, there's things you'll even miss."

Tim got into his blankets like a boy in his first term at school. Once again he was weighed down by a melancholy that was almost physical. He could see nothing beyond this. All his mind, far out to its horizon, was trenches and ruins, and ruins and trenches. What was the good of coming out of the line at all? One only had to go back. Why not stay in the line and get the worst over at once?

It was a long time before he slept. He lay listening to the rain and the wind and the

snoring of the men. Now and then someone stirred. The door of the barn rattled at each onslaught of the rain-filled wind. Water was dripping from a chink in the roof, drip, drip, drip, on the straw in the centre of the barn. He started to count the drops. He counted the gusts of wind. He counted Curly's snores, and, still counting, fell asleep.

The next morning the rain had stopped. There was a pale promise of sunshine. Water gurgled outside the barn, scudding along in a narrow gutter. Tim, with depression still over him, ate his bacon in silence. Behind the barn the guns roared like a distant sea in storm. That evening he was to go back again to the line. He took Meg's last letter from his pocket and read it through. Then he looked at the writing and called into his mind a picture of Meg writing to him. He knew just how she would sit at the little desk in the parlour. He knew which pen she would use. She would try it with her fingers to see whether the nib were crossed. Then she would start. He could see the curve of the back, the tendrils of hair above her neck.

"Oh well!" said Tim, and folded the letter and put it back in his pocket.

The journey to the trenches that evening

was like a hundred others. Tim knew it all so well. The heavy rainfall made it rather more uncomfortable, that was all. More water about. As they came nearer to the war Tim was reminded of the sea-side. Sometimes the tide, creeping over the sands, fills in little hollows, making pools of them, and leaves mounds standing high and dry. Children pick their way from one small island to another. It was like that, he thought, except that the hollows were big hollows and the mounds were wet and sticky. Instead of yellow sand there was dark, treacherous mud into which one sank, sometimes up to the knees. The ground between shell-holes smelt, or perhaps it was the dirty, greenish water in the holes that smelt. Swamp-land as far as the eye could reach, mile after mile of it, until Tim could have cried aloud for a tree or the song of a bird. It was like a walk in a nightmare, with heavy shackles on one's feet, and a feeling of something lying in wait or pursuing. And then, unexpectedly, Curly spoke.

"Serve the blighters right if they capture this," he said.

And after that, Tim felt better. He made a silly joke, and the men round him laughed.

Perhaps it wasn't so bad. Perhaps it "might be worse," to borrow another phrase from Curly. If only one could know it would all be over one day, thought Tim.

The sight of the flares was welcome. It proved that somewhere ahead this crawling along would end.

Once in the trenches, everyone seemed to want to let himself go. The reaction caught them all.

"What-oh, Tich! Marylebone swimmin' baths ain't in it."

"Got your raft, Tom?"

"Ever drunk water afore?"

"This way for the flood."

"Tickled any carp, 'Arry?"

"You've clicked all right for a show," said one man to Curly.

"Well, I didn't come up 'ere to sail paper-boats," Curly answered.

They passed a man on a stretcher. A piece of shrapnel had hit him at the side of the mouth, knocking some teeth out.

"'E's bin to the dentist," said Curly.

"Yes. Gas an' all," said a stretcher-bearer. "'Ad a tidy bit o' gas over this morning."

That spell in the trenches was a case of "Nothing of special interest to report." It was mostly a matter of trench routine.

There is always work to do. For a trench is evolved, never made. Tim worked on, finding monotony almost as wearing as danger. For many men it is more wearing. Doing unimportant things hour after hour, that is the test of the true soldier.

After the first day Curly was sent down with dysentery.

"One misses him," said Tim. "He's like something to lean on when you're fagged or fed up. He's always the same."

It was in the trenches that Curly was missed most, for it was there that his personality impressed itself most on his friends. He had just that touch of mystery which we call personality that makes a man appreciated in the world of the trenches.

Curly rejoined them in billets. Tim was talking to O'Hanlon, who was to go on leave the next day. Suddenly Tim paused and looked round the barn.

"Hear anything?" he said.

"Yes," said O'Hanlon.

"I think I know that noise," said Tim.

He walked over to a corner of the barn.

"Yes, it's our old pal, the Sleeping Beauty," said Tim.

Curly stirred and opened his eyes. He grinned, showing his tobacco-stained teeth.

"You blighters," he said. "Seem to 'ave made an 'obby o' wakin' me up. Glad to see you, you noisy interferin' devil."

CHAPTER XII.

LONDON AND THE WAR.

Meg found plenty to do in the shop. When Tim went back to France she contrived to fill her days with those little details that are all lonely women have to fall back upon. She, like all the women, had realized that she must not think too much. There must be no idle hours in the day-time. For the nights were a hard test of her character. Her mind would go back instinctively to that last glimpse of Tim, as the train moved out of the station. That moment is, above all others perhaps, the moment when women rise to heights beyond even the dreams of poets. They are for a second what young lovers make them in imagination. They are as high as those ideal women of reverie. For they must smile, and they know, and they only, the cost of that last smile. Their men go to an adventure and their friends are

round them. Constant activity and the thrill of danger fill their time. But the women, turning away from the platform, go home quietly, calculating already when the first letter can arrive, wondering to what part of the line their men will be sent. Afterwards there is never-ending suspense. There are rumours, a fear of telegrams, eager scanning of headlines, newspaper boys shouting in the street, the awful silence of the long nights, or the nerve-wearying raids. War is more a mental torture for the women. For the men it is more physical.

So Meg worked in the shop and tried to be cheerful.

One day, when she had gone on the top of an omnibus into London, as much for the air as for anything, she found herself looking at two faces that she vaguely remembered to have seen before. A man and a girl were sitting opposite to her in the omnibus on the way home. They were the first to settle her doubts. As soon as the girl spoke Meg recognised the voice.

"Surely," said the girl, "your husband is in Mr.—Corporal O'Hanlon's section?"

"Oh, yes," said Meg. "And I knew I had seen both of you before."

"This is my fiancée," said O'Hanlon, "Miss Derry."

"I suppose you're on leave," said Meg.

"Yes. I left your husband fit and well. I think things are pretty quiet there now, at any rate in our part."

After that they left the war and talked about other things, but Meg, who wanted to talk of Tim, seized her chance. When O'Hanlon and Miss Derry got out of the omnibus she said:

"Wouldn't you—I wonder, would you both come to tea with me to-morrow?"

O'Hanlon looked at the girl.

"We could, couldn't we?" he asked. "Nothing on, Grania."

"We should love to," said the girl.

"Well, four o'clock, 17, Silverslade Street, Putney, just over the bridge. Goodbye. Goodbye."

"Afraid they won't find it very grand," said Meg to herself as she looked round the little parlour that evening. "I expect they go to big restaurants."

Then she began to wonder why she had asked them to come, and could find for explanation only a vague idea that the impulse was prompted by a desire to talk to somebody who knew Tim and had been with him for so long. It was the nearest she could get to Tim, except when she was reading his short letters. She wished she had known

O'Hanlon better. She would have liked to ask all manner of questions that he would be bound to think stupid; she wanted to know little details of the life out there, so that she could make pictures of Tim, true pictures. At present she had only her imagination to help her, for his letters did not reveal much to her. From them she could not go much beyond the idea of a very homesick Tim.

The next day O'Hanlon and Grania Derry came to tea in Meg's parlour. They adapted themselves immediately to the situation and at once set Meg at her ease. Grania praised her frock and her house. O'Hanlon said he had never tasted such good cake since the old days of peace. The mention of the old days of peace gave Meg her chance. She had been lying in ambush behind a screen of small talk, waiting to pounce out and seize some such phrase as this. After that she made O'Hanlon talk about Tim. She asked how he got on with the men, whether he was very unhappy, if he was a good soldier. All her questions he answered, and she kept every word he said to think about afterwards. While he talked Grania leaned her elbows on the table and listened. She did not hear all that he was saying. She was watching his face and

listening to the tones of his voice. As soon as Meg appeared to be satisfied O'Hanlon changed the conversation.

Before they went they asked Meg to tea with them two days later. Meg came to the door with them, through the shop, where Steve was cutting a customer's hair. He looked up in surprise and then stared at Grania's hat. Steve was impressed and stood with his scissors dangling till the outer door opened. Meg watched them walk away and then turned into the parlour again, without the customary glance at Steve. She sat down in the parlour, pushed her hair back from her forehead, and began to think. The room in which Tim had been talked of was lonely, but for a moment she had a fancy that there was magic in it, in the corners, near the door; everywhere. It had held words about Tim. "Tim," she said quite quietly to herself; for she had never lost the almost dream-like love that is so often worn dull and thin by the years. When she went to bed, she lay awake a long time piecing together the fragments she had gathered from O'Hanlon; trying to see Tim moving about the trenches or in billets.

Two days later she made her way to the small house on the Chelsea Embankment, where Grania Derry lived. Meg found her

at the piano. She was playing Grieg, and O'Hanlon was listening. After she had shaken hands with Meg she continued to play, and O'Hanlon said he could see the elves peeping out from behind old trees. Meg didn't quite understand that, but she said it was very nice music. Tea was brought in by a neat maid.

"We want you to come to the Pallaceum to-night, Mrs Himrick," said O'Hanlon. "We've got three stalls."

Meg said she would like to go very much.

"It's the kind of place," O'Hanlon went on, "where you can forget there is a war on. It's lively, and you see people enjoying themselves, or at any rate trying to or pretending to."

"I've been once or twice with Tim," said Meg. "He likes those funny tramps on bicycles, and all that sort of thing."

"And what do you like?" said Grania.

"I, oh I like it all. I just watch Tim most of the time. He laughs so much. He's got an infectious kind of laugh, hasn't he, Mr. O'Hanlon?"

"Yes. It's valuable out there."

They discussed various plays they had seen, and Meg found that the young lovers did not go much to the theatre. They liked

walking in the country and having tea at inns and discovering quaint old places.

"We like the country," said Grania, "about Autumn time. You can walk miles without being too hot or too cold. You take your chance about an inn. You just stop when you come to something that attracts you, or you make for some place that's almost hidden in the hills. Of course the train journey back to London is a bad ending. It spoils things a bit. When we're married I expect we'll just go on walking together always. Won't we, Boy?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," said O'Hanlon.

Meg thought that sounded nice. Perhaps she and Tim would be able to go off for long walks one day.

"Aren't you a poet?" she asked.

"Well, yes. Why?"

"You seem so—"

"I'm not your idea of one."

"No. I thought they were all so different from other people."

"And he's disappointingly sane and ordinary. Is that it?" said Grania, and laughed.

"What is your husband going to do when this is all over?" she asked presently.

"I don't know. I don't think he's really

thought about it. Of course he loves the country."

O'Hanlon lit his pipe and asked for some more music. Grania went over to the piano and turned over some sheets.

"What do you like, Mrs. Himrick?"

"Almost anything, I think," said Meg.

Grania played for a long time, and then got up suddenly.

"What about dinner, Boy?"

"Time we were moving, I suppose," said O'Hanlon.

They went by omnibus from the King's Road, up Sloane Street, and along Piccadilly. From Piccadilly Circus they walked into Soho, and had dinner in a shabby little restaurant. There were two or three Belgian and French soldiers there, a French girl, and a Canadian officer who sat unnecessarily close to a shrill-voiced chorus girl. Everybody in the room was admitted to the chorus girl's confidence. She was tired of kicking her legs high in musical comedy and revue. She was one with ambitions, she was. She had an eye on a part in an adapted French farce. She knew a man who had influence at the theatre, and she was "all out" after him. And she winked twice and put up her thumbs.

Grania told Meg all about an old village

she and " Boy " had discovered. It was in a valley, and all the roads seemed to end without finding it. They were just arms groping for it. Boy said it was a dream village and didn't exist, and that they had never really been there. But anyhow it was a wonderful place.

While she was talking the chorus girl grew louder, until one had to listen. The Canadian officer, whose eyes were unsteady, seemed incapable of interrupting. He simply watched her, and occasionally stroked her thick hand in a maudlin fashion. Then O'Hanlon broke out. He spoke to Grania, with an occasional glance at Meg, and as he spoke he seemed to lose consciousness of himself, to be carried away.

" That," he said, and indicated the girl, " that is a good example of what is happening to women. That girl was probably led to this by some beastly book. It is the muck that masquerades as literature that is depraving taste—that and the Press and the theatres. The photographs outside theatres are getting more disgusting every day. There is one in Shaftesbury Avenue of a man kissing a girl's bare shoulder. People accuse me of having a nasty mind, but is that incident the kind of thing to make public? Isn't it unnecessary, and as beastly as some

of the obscene advertisements that follow you in tube and omnibus? I suppose the tension that comes with a great thing like war makes people search for stimulants. But they find only stimulants for the senses. A battle had to be fought, a long battle, before 'Damaged Goods' could be performed, as if an attack on a loathsome disease were a shameful thing. And all the time the most suggestive plays are produced. When Barrie and Galsworthy go, what will the situation be? One or two men who care to write clean plays will be left to fight those giant syndicates who employ young men of the literary underworld to write filth and earn the applause of a rising generation of men and women 'about town.' So, the point is that to have what she calls a 'good time,' a girl's got to behave and talk in the new fashion. She must be able to chat about all the latest nonsense in the theatres, and she must be shameless. Then men take her out—young officers chiefly. People talk about a 'demand' for rotten stuff. It's not that. It's because the chief purveyors have no ideals. They foist bad things on the public until the public is used to them. Then they say there's a demand for what they supply. Imagine one or two people content to lose money. Imagine

them gradually swamping the place, as these manager syndicates do, gradually spreading their good plays and good literature. God! I don't think some of these rich people know what they could do with their money. Just look at that wretched specimen of the Beauty Chorus."

He sat back and looked at the girl who was obviously pleased with the attention she was attracting. Grania laughed, and Meg was too shaken to know quite how she felt. It was as if a whirlwind had passed.

They made their way to a large music-hall. The orchestra was playing a loud, tuneless march as they sat down. The curtain went up, and a young man with a slim waist sang about all the hearts he had broken. He was followed by a troupe of jugglers who threw plates at each other and uttered queer noises every now and then. They frequently kissed the tips of their fingers in the direction of the audience. Meg, turning over the programme, was disappointed to find there were no tramps on bicycles. The orchestra broke into the refrain of a sentimental song of the day. The tune was whistled back from various parts of the auditorium. The appearance of a tall blonde girl was the signal for an outburst of enthusiasm.

"They say she's an Austrian," said a lady

at Meg's side, removing her opera glasses.

The popular favourite sang, against a black background with the moon following her slightest movements, a sad song about love. The moon went out suddenly, and in brilliant sunshine she sang something more cheerful, about a man who called her just his cutest baby in the great big world. There were hunchings of the shoulders and rag-time noises all through the song. One felt it was all written out of the noises and the gestures; something that grew out of negro grimaces.

In the interval O'Hanlon said to Grania:

"It's not up to much, is it?"

"No," she answered. "But it's trying to be lively."

The second half of the programme moved on the same lines, except that there was a sketch, in which a leading actor prostituted a real talent.

"They say he gets £200 a week," said the well-informed lady next to Meg.

In the middle of this sketch it became evident that all was not well. During a dramatic pause there was audible a muffled sound of guns.

"Raid," said the well-informed lady, and hastily collecting her belongings she left the theatre, a pale daughter trailing in her wake.

"Raid." The word was passed along. It was tossed like a ball from stalls to boxes, from boxes to circle. Several people went out in a great hurry. The actors and actresses went on with their work.

"There's something to be said for the stage after all," said Grania. And, presently, "we stay, don't we? Are you scared of raids, Mrs. Himrick? Everyone hates them, but, I mean, do you want to go?"

"No," said Meg. "We're as safe here as anywhere."

"Of course," said O'Hanlon.

So they stayed.

Sometimes the sound of guns came nearer. Then it died away again. Once there was a tremendous explosion, but it must have been very far away. When they came out of the theatre into the street they saw people hurrying along, the remnant who had not yet taken shelter. A special constable was leading a limp woman by the arm. Overhead the searchlights were brandishing their great white arms about the sky. O'Hanlon took Meg by one arm and Grania by the other.

"We'll find a shelter somewhere," he said.

They came to a flight of stone steps. At the bottom, in a kind of cellar, men and women and children were crowding. O'Hanlon managed to secure a corner. There was a

child whimpering close to him. "It's all right, dear, they'll be gorn soon," the mother was saying over and over again, mechanically. For a short while there was a pattering of shrapnel on roofs and in the streets.

"Lucky we came in," said Meg.

When the guns ceased one or two people began, diffidently, to make jokes. It was only a question of waiting for the bugles now, and O'Hanlon had an impression of movement in the darkness, of people stretching cramped limbs. A man coughed violently as if he had been saving up for it. "Now we shan't be long," said an old woman with a baby in her arms.

"'Old 'im, 'old 'im," someone shouted, and in the doorway there was an indistinct glimpse of a man kicking and struggling. He was in khaki, and two other soldiers were trying to pinion his arms and legs. "Shell-shock," one of them said to O'Hanlon. "'E always gets took bad in a raid." Presently the struggles ceased, and the man was taken off to an ambulance by his friends and two special constables.

Meg was glad to come out into the open air again when the welcome bugles sounded. O'Hanlon was lucky enough to capture a taxi. Meg was deposited at Putney and

O'Hanlon drove Grania back to Chelsea, dismissed the cab, and walked to his own rooms.

"She's got pluck," he said, before he left Grania.

"She has, more than you think. She was terrified."

"And you?"

"Well, I hate it as much as anyone."

"I know you do, dear. You were splendid."

"It was only because I wouldn't show I was afraid."

"My darling, that's about as high as courage can go in these days. That's what keeps a man up at the front. He won't show his feelings. He won't let people see he's homesick or dead beat or terrified."

Meg, back in the parlour at Putney, was standing by the mantel-piece with one glove still in her hand. "I wonder," she was thinking, "if they knew about it. I wonder if they saw what I was going through. I bet that girl knew. Women always do. Why, she was terrified, and wouldn't show it. I wonder if Tim's like that out there."

These two visits were the beginning of a friendship between Meg and Grania, so that when O'Hanlon had gone back again to France they used to meet frequently. There

were messages for Meg in O'Hanlon's letters, and Tim always asked to have his "regards" given to O'Hanlon's fiancée. Meg began to be less lonely. Hour after hour these two women waited for letters. But when they met their conversation was of anything but what was in their hearts. They never quite broke down a barrier that would not let them quite meet each other. They never lost a touch of self-consciousness. Grania was afraid of seeming to be condescending. Meg was afraid of seeming to realize condescension. Each in her own way waited, but each was glad of the friendship.

CHAPTER XIII.

JUST ROUTINE.

In the making of roads there has always been romance. Along roads came civilization, new ideas, new races. First the Army, then the settlers, penetrating, spreading to the four corners of the earth. Tim, making his own particular piece of road, thought of none of these things. It was just a job. Yet he was proud of it, as it grew. He felt, in some manner, a pioneer. It was slow work. Branches and whole trees uprooted on all sides, and timber from smashed dugouts. Here and there a big chasm to be filled in or bridged over. Sometimes German shells, searching for British guns, fell close to them; sometimes the work of several hours was undone by a lucky shot. It was dull work and slow work, and Death, in his impartial way, took toll here as in the trenches.

There were still skeletons of trees on each side of the workers, and ahead of them. There were other traces of battles fought there. Rifles and gas-helmets and equipment. In one hole there were two German great-coats and two British bayonets. It was a new experience for Tim, and on that account he welcomed it. He had more opportunity than before of looking round him, of getting an impression of the machinery behind the lines. An infantryman is apt to disregard what is going on in the back area. He comes to take everything for granted. There was an ammunition dump close to Tim's billet. He used to watch the lorries being loaded and unloaded. He used to see rations coming up too, and he saw how these things would be affecting him personally, if he were in the line.

It was a proud day when the road reached the edge of the shattered wood. Tim stood and looked along it and out beyond where it dwindled into a mere track. The wreckage in the wood had been cleared up, and one day a Battalion came along the new road, swinging up towards the line. That was the christening day. It was a christening ceremony of heavy boots and songs and laughter. And Tim, the creator, watched them marching up. It was his road.

"It's a tidy bit o' work," said Curly.

A drab motor omnibus was rattling along a road behind them.

"Look at that," said Tim. "Doesn't it remind you of the old No. 14 'bus to Putney? No. You don't know that one. But it makes me think. Up Piccadilly it goes, past Hyde Park Corner, by Harrod's and South Kensington Station, and then down the Fulham Road. Lord! It brings it all back, seeing that lumbering thing. And mightn't that old canteen place be the Chelsea Palace?"

Curly sucked at his pipe in silence.

"Well," said Tim, "doesn't it make you think?"

Curly removed his pipe, and drew the back of his hand across his lips.

"What a talkative beggar you are!" said Tim.

Curly refilled his pipe, drew out a match from a dusty corner of his pocket, struck it on his boot, and lit up.

"It is peaceful here," said Tim. "Makes you hate all that business up there."

Curly grinned.

"Makes you long to get home again," Tim went on. "Just to be through with it all. Aren't you going to speak to-day?" he shouted at Curly.

"Talkin's good for them as likes it," answered Curly. "But I allus told you I don't 'old with all this sentimental stuff, moonin' about the place, doin' the outcast stunt like 'eavy drama. Don't do no good to yourself and gives others the sick. Cut it out, son. If you've got to think that way, think it, but don't yelp about it round 'ere."

"You're an extraordinary chap," said Tim.

"I'm no more extra-ordinary than anybody. I've knocked about a lot, that's all. You know what I told you. When you get this way o' feelin' go and get a job. Keep occupied. It's not gay, this life, but it might be bags worse."

"I suppose it might," said Tim.

Work on the road being completed, the Battalion was sent back to the line. Tim's Platoon was detailed to garrison a Keep. There was a kind of circular yard strewn with bricks and rubble, and then, down steps at the side, a maze of galleries and corridors intercommunicating: an intricate minute fortress. The best that could be said for it was that it was a drier life than the trenches. It didn't matter when it rained. There were loopholes at regular intervals all round the cellars, from which one had a desolate view of barren fields and shell-holes, and old wire.

On clear days a church spire could be seen away behind the German lines, and tall trees and brown houses huddled together and a white road that lost itself in blurred woods. The sentry who stood outside the Keep had to be very alert. For someone coming up the road might by accident show a light. A light was the signal for a German with a trained rifle to open fire. The bullets hit the crumbled wall in the same spot every time, so that they would catch anyone passing. They had worn the crumbling wall thin where they hit it.

Tim heard afterwards the story of the Keep. An old woman in a village near by told him that it had been an Estaminet before the war. There had been orchards round it, and the farmers of the neighbourhood were prosperous men. They would meet there in the evenings and sing their songs until the rafters shook. Then came the war, and the farmers carried their songs away south to the Ardennes. Strangers sat at the wooden tables and sang new songs. They were the British soldiers. The Germans were reported to be advancing; the guns were heard. The inhabitants left the village. The Germans advanced, wavered, and broke before a counter-attack of Scottish troops, but the German guns had done their work.

A sad little Estaminet gaped through the window frames at scarred fields and muddy wastes. The orchards were shattered. In front of the village ran trenches, with barbed wire before them, and staff officers worked by candle light in the front room of the inn. Sandbags darkened the house. Then another German attack demolished what was left of the village. Only the cellar of the inn remained, a large cellar, and German troops occupied it, with new songs. Now one side held the site, now another. Gradually a Keep was evolved. Then the British advanced again. For a while the cellar lay in No Man's Land, between the fury of two armies. Then the British came back. A Colonel slept where there had once been rats and rows of bottles. The line moved slowly forward. Wounded men were brought in on stretchers. The voices of the guns became fainter. Since then it had been a Keep, and had not changed hands again.

Tim tried to continue the story in his mind. He imagined another advance. There would be a dump there, coils of wire and bits of wood in the cellar. Then the dump would move forward, and men would come to the village to build. A new house would rise above the cellar, and the Frenchmen, the farmers, would bring their songs back from

the Ardennes; here and there a wooden leg, an arm missing. Someone, rummaging in the rubble, would come upon the old sign-board, discoloured and chipped, and the windows would look out over new-ploughed lands.

But, as he only heard the old woman's story after he had left the Keep, he found nothing exceptional in the experience of garrisoning it. It was an uneventful time, but there was one incident that stamped itself on his mind. He had been clearing away rubbish in a corner of the yard one day when unexpectedly he found, under some rags and sandbags, a small tin soldier. He picked the soldier up and kept it, wondering what the boy was like who had played with it and what glamour he had thrown over the business of soldiering. It recalled to his mind another occasion when he had seen a room in a ruined house, with still some remnants of paper peeling off the walls. It had been a gay paper, the kind one finds in a nursery: boats on a very blue sea, and birds round brown sails. He had looked out of the window at a narrow path running through what may have been a cornfield. At the end of the path a rusty, iron gate lay on the ground. It had opened on to a broader road which ran to meet spires

in the distance. Then, looking down, he had heard a rat moving over broken bottles.

Incidents of this kind were his lasting impressions. He puzzled over them in the darkness at night. He asked himself why should things be so. His mind, staring at an incomprehensible world, became, like a Russian novelist's, an immense interrogation mark. He tried to find reasons for all the strange things that had come into his life. He was like a man on a quest. He hunted for a purpose in it all, an ordered intelligible purpose, and, like many a more sophisticated man than himself, failed to find an explanation. It was wrong. That was all. It could not have been intended. It gave him a quaint idea of something lop-sided, all out of balance.

It was no good taking such musings to Curly, who would have met them in his own dogged way. And of O'Hanlon Tim was still a little shy. Se he kept them to himself.

He was to have yet one more impression of a ruined house that had become a strong point. There was a night attack by the Germans. Like the opening of a great symphony the guns began. Firing spread to left and right. One could trace the curve of the trenches by spurts of flame. Flares falling from a height picked out fragments of

ground. Once a pool of water glowed like a living eye. They held their fire, the men in the cellar. And then, suddenly, they held their fire no longer. It was as if a dumb man shouted loudly all of a sudden. From loopholes overgrown with weed they fired. Two eyes had watched at each slit for hours.

It was only after the fight that Tim knew he had enfiladed the Germans at a critical moment. The old house fell silent again. Only if you had gone very close up to it would you have heard many low voices agreeing over and over again that they wanted to be in Michigan, down on the farm.

Tim went in search of Curly, and found him talking to a youngster who had come out with the last draft.

"What you want to get into your nozzle," Curly was saying, "is that you won't be fightin' all the time 'ere. It's not all scrappin'. It's not a bit like what them magazines and novels write. You won't get your V.C. the first night you're up 'ere for the sake o' the girl you want to marry—you know the 'ot air them blokes shoves on the market. It's not like that. No fear. There's a lot o' dull work goin'. You won't go throwin' bombs for two hours because 'er rose is next your 'eart. You'll be all the

better in a scrap after you've done some o' the drudgin'. Get me?"

"I get you," said the youngster.

Practice followed precept. Shortly afterwards O'Hanlon came to detail some men for work that had to be done. Tim and Curly were in the party.

"What's the job?" said Curly.

"A beastly one again," said O'Hanlon. "We've got to clear up one of those roads to-night."

Tim knew what to expect. Once on the Somme he had had similar work to do after a fight. It was about the most unpleasant job that can come a soldier's way.

"We're for it," said Curly. "Save up your fags. You'll need 'em all, I reckon."

The party set out, picking their way over rough ground, and soon came to the road they were to clear. The breath of foulness which the wind swept up out of the darkness only confirmed his anticipations. Fortunately the men could smoke with safety, as an embankment rose up on each side of the road, beaten in in places. They started work at the top end of the road, moving among bodies and fragments of bodies and branches and splintered wood and mud. Sometimes a shell dropped just beyond the embankment and sent the earth tumbling to the road or tossed

it high in the air. When a shell burst on the road itself it disturbed the remains of dead men and trees and dugouts. A leg was whirled violently against a tree-trunk near which Tim was working. The whirring and the thud, for it passed close to him, made him turn. Immediately there came over him the old physical sickness that he had known during his early days in France. He dug his teeth into his cigarette and spat out paper and tobacco. He looked round him. The darkness was almost a presence. It was heavy. It made his head swim. He thought of the youngster whom Curly had lectured. That made him pull himself together. He bent to his work again, clearing things to the side of the road. Then his spade caught in something. It was something that made a tearing sound. He stooped over it. Then he drew back and almost cried out. His spade was caught in a piece of clothing, but there was something all mixed up with it. He dragged, but there was a heavy weight on the spade. He tried to lift the spade, but something came with it, a hideous shapeless mass. There were bits of hair over a broken face. A bloated rat moved away as Tim shook the spade from side to side. He shook it frantically and kicked at it, and finally loosened it, and

staggered back. He put his hand to his forehead and drew it away wet with sweat. The rat had settled somewhere else. He could hear it . . . .

He moved to another place, where there were branches, and began to work with his head half averted from his spade, on the blade of which he knew something had stuck. He drove it in among the branches, buried it deep in the foul-smelling mud. He was cold now and weak. His head ached. It was like having fever. He was frightened he would begin to talk to himself, so he went to where Curly worked. He didn't mind treading on bodies now. He didn't really notice. He only wanted to throw that spade away, far away, out of his hand, and out of his mind. He lit another cigarette mechanically, and helped Curly to move a big branch.

He passed the rest of that night without quite knowing what he did. Once, when the moon came from behind clouds, Curly told him there was something on his boot, and he looked down and said nothing. Only his hands shook and he sweated again. He dug his feet into the mud. He wanted to tear his clothes off, to come right out of his very body and be cleaned. When they marched away from the road he did not feel he was

leaving it. There was no elation. He began to count the number of times his right foot touched the ground, and then his left. Perhaps he had gone mad, he thought.

People at home in England read the next day that all was quiet on that sector. Meg read it. Grania read it. They were pleased. There was nothing of special interest to report. Many of you read it, and were satisfied. Perhaps you had a glimpse of tired men sleeping, getting back their strength, resting their nerves. It was good for you to think like that. And so the papers did not say that a few men cleared up, as Curly put it, "a dirty mess on a road."

After it was over Tim saw the youngster.

"Well, Loring," said Curly.

"Well?" said Loring.

"You'll do," said Curly.

He had evidently not been affected by the work. Tim wondered at him, marvelled that he could begin his soldiering in such a way. He recalled a conversation he had heard. Someone had talked about the sensitive man in war. "Suppose I'm sensitive," he said. But then, O'Hanlon. Surely he must be worse. Weren't poets sensitive devils? Yet O'Hanlon managed all right.

O'Hanlon's nails had bitten into the palms of his hands and, in a dark corner, he was retching.

CHAPTER XIV.

DEATH AND TIM.

It was a lonely place. And it was more than lonely. It had that something which one finds only on an old battlefield. Tim wondered where the bullet had come from. He had an impression of being isolated in a strange land, with Death for companion. Death had him at an obvious disadvantage. Tim kept as low as he could, and tried to determine his direction by the flares. There were no stars. He had not realized his helplessness until that bullet had come singing out of the darkness. He wanted to hear someone calling him by his name, or making a joke, or cursing. Even a rat would have been welcome. He had stayed behind the rest of the ration party to adjust the sandbags round his legs. He had stayed too long. "I'll catch up," he had said. And then a single bullet had come, accurately enough aimed, too.

He decided to continue his journey on his hands and knees. He began to crawl in the direction the rest of the party had taken.

Heut!

Another bullet passed, rather high over him, and then another, lower. He flattened himself on the ground. He pressed his stomach against the wet earth, and his nose too. He could get no lower. He lay motionless, trying to hold his breath. Again death whisked by him. It was all so uncanny. A fellow hadn't a dog's chance. The only thing to do was to watch for the flash of the rifle. He lay still for some time, and when the next shot was fired at him he saw distinctly the spurt of fire, away to his left. Very cautiously he moved, and the next bullet went very wide. Evidently the German had lost him, had not seen him move. He edged further in what he imagined was the direction of the British line, and then began to crawl obliquely and very slowly towards the place where he had marked the flash. The man fired several times more, but evidently at random. Tim felt less lonely now. Death had become something more than a weird presence. He began rather to enjoy himself. It was an adventure at any rate, for he had made up his mind as to what he

would do. He would stalk the man. What would happen then he didn't see quite clearly, but at any rate it was adventure. It was something new. He took a bit of mud in his hands and made it into a ball, and, with as little movement as possible, jerked it away to the left of him, as low as he could send it. The German heard the sound of its fall. It struck the earth some yards away. After a short interval he fired, and again Tim marked the flash. He wondered how the man had got to such a place. He recalled the rambling fight of the day before and concluded that he must be one of those Germans who had succeeded in remaining ambushed. Nobody knew how the line ran outside his own bit of trench.

He crawled on. The German was still shooting at the place where he had heard the sound of the mud falling.

After some time Tim made out a blurr in front of him, slightly to his left. As he came nearer he saw that it was a kind of circular ruin of bricks. There was hardly one brick standing on another, but there were doubtless shell-holes that would conceal a man. The adventure appealed to him more and more. He decided that the sandbag of rations would have to be sacrificed, at any rate for the time. He left it in a hole, and

dragged himself more carefully than ever towards the bricks. There was a little mound of earth ahead, and he contrived to keep this between himself and the hiding-place of the German. Nearer and nearer he drew, and began to grip his rifle tighter. He released his safety-catch, keeping the rifle on the ground. He waited for another flash, but there were no more shots to guide him. He determined to risk it and go nearer.

When he came to the mound he was surprised to see that he was separated from the bricks by only a short distance. Then there was another shot and he saw the flash, and the rifle on the lip of a hole behind some rubble. He worked his way round, so as to be almost behind the hiding place. With his heart beating violently he crawled on and before he meant to speak he had said quickly "Hands up!" His rifle was covering the head of the German, who had turned round suddenly at the sound of the voice. To make quite certain of his victory Tim made a remark to an imaginary man on his right, and nodded his head to an imaginary man on the other side of the German. The latter turned his head to look, thinking himself surrounded, and Tim came nearer, quickly getting to his feet.

His bayonet was fixed, and the German came out of his hole, leaving his rifle behind him.

Tim, who had expected a surly, tough-looking man, was surprised to confront a fragile rather puzzled-looking youngster in spectacles. He at once felt as calm as he had resolved to pretend to be. "Come on," he said, and together they walked towards the British lines, which showed up as a dark furrow ahead. Presently he stopped. "May as well get the rations, too," he thought. He signed to the German, and they turned back. Tim found the hole where he had deposited the sandbag. He bent over to lift it up.

"Have a bit of bread?" he said, and he turned round to make the motion of eating.

The German was on him at once. Tim felt his fingers round his throat. They were clammy fingers. "He's afraid, really," flashed through Tim's mind. He felt himself being pressed back into the shell-hole. He suddenly relaxed his hold of his opponent, with the result that they both tumbled into the muddy water at the bottom of the hole. Tim scrambled up and shot out his fist at the German's head. The spectacles shivered to pieces, and the youngster staggered against the side of the hole. Tim hit again and then

sprang back and groped for his rifle. He detached the bayonet and stuck it in the mud behind him. Then he came forward again, threatening with the butt of his rifle. The youngster made a wild rush, and evaded Tim's blow. Tim lost his balance, and a blow on the side of the head knocked him into the mud again. Here they rolled over and over, pommelling each other, their legs interlocked. Tim saw his bayonet sticking in the mud. He flung out his right arm and grasped it. The German was on his chest, squeezing the breath out of him. He raised his arm, and the bayonet was poised . . . The pressure on his chest relaxed. He stuck the bayonet into something soft.

"You bastard," said Tim. "Fil-thy d'ty bast'."

There was a queer sobbing noise, and then a gurgling. The German rolled limply forward, his head sagging. Tim struck again and again, each time with some word blurted thickly. He went on striking at the head, and then he struck at the body with all his might. He only stopped from sheer weakness. He did not look at what he had done, but climbed very quickly out of the hole, hugging his sandbag of rations, which was wet and muddy. He buried his bayonet blade several times in the earth, and, with

his rifle slung, made his way to the British lines.

"What the 'ell 'ave you bin up to?" said Curly. "Look at you."

"Bit of a scrap," said Tim, glancing down at his clothes all caked with mud.

"Bit of one?" said Curly. "I should think it was blinkin' near a whole one, wasn't it? What 'ave you done with the enemy?"

"Done 'im in," said Tim. "Done 'im in proper."

"Shake, mate. Good work, son. You're gettin' a reg'lar blood-merchant, you are, blind me if you aren't. Give us your rifle a minute."

Tim handed it over, wondering. Curly wiped something off on a sandbag, and in that instant all the glory of his adventure left Tim. He felt cold, although the sweat had hardly dried on him, and sickness stole over him again. He hated it all intensely. He wanted to be very far away from the war, somewhere quiet and cool. He remembered a garden in a picture. There were neat, tall trees, and lawns and terraces and broad, white steps, and a girl walking there with hair the same colour as Meg's. A page in red satin held up her train; waiting maids came behind. And a young knight in armour

was advancing to meet her. It was called "Home from the Wars." Tim wondered if he would ever get home. He thought of the green door in the wall that he had read of in some book, and wished he could find it. In that horrible shell-hole, he knew, lay the body he had slashed and raved at. There were probably rats there by now . . . .

"Mind out a second," said a voice.

Tim drew his legs in.

"What's the joke now?" he asked.

"No joke. Want to get by."

"Come on, then."

"Well, shake off your twilight sleep. I'm not a midwife any'ow. Can't think why you shove your legs all over France and Belgium."

Tim recognized Curly, but he was sick and tired and disgusted.

"Oh, go to hell!" he said.

Curly looked down, surprised. Tim did not speak like this.

"'Ullo," he said. "A new mood this is. What's bitten you?"

Tim took no notice of him. He did not think he could go on much longer. All the details of trench life were wearing his nerves. He hated the mud and the perpetual disturbances.

"You're a fine soldier," said Curly.

"Keepin' canaries is more in your line. Feedin' blasted minnows or puttin' the yellow in marmalade. Holy flamin' Jim! Wake up."

Tim sat up.

"Look here," he said. "If you knew what I'd done you wouldn't talk like that. I've had a hell of a time. A fight and all that. I'm about down and out."

"Oh, come orf it. Don't you come the old soldier over me. Anyone'd think you was the first bloke that ever done a Fritz in. Cut that stuff out, son. I'm not a kid."

This was the beginning of a bad period for Tim. Everything irritated his nerves. He had no patience, and his temper was frequently out of his control. Curly watched in his quiet way, but he could not diagnose the trouble as easily as usual. So there was nothing for him to do but bear with Tim, humour him when necessary, be firm with him now and then. Tim did not realize at the time what he owed to the unflagging vigil of the old soldier and his constant friendship.

The bad days continued for a long time, and then, suddenly, the cloud lifted, and Tim was himself again.

"Thank the Lord you've got that bee out of your bonnet," said Curly. "You've bin

like a whinin' child all these last days. Fair gave me the fidgets, you did. And now I've got some news for you. I've seen 'em."

"Seen who?" asked Tim, walking to the door of the barn.

"Why, the Yanks. Saw 'em marching along outside the village 'ere. They 'alted for a bit. Fine tall chaps. Singin' like fury."

"Think they'll be a good lot?"

"You bet they will. All that 'ustle stunt'll come in useful, like, if they aren't too proud to learn."

"Talk to any of 'em?"

"Yes. One young 'un with about one 'air each side 'is mouth, longin' to be mistook for a moustache. Told me 'e felt fair e-lated. That's 'ow 'e said it. E-lated, kind of down his nose. Said 'e was darned glad 'is trainin' was over. Thought it pretty dull, drillin' an' all that. 'Now the real business starts,' 'e said. 'You'll find it real, all right, all right,' says I. Then 'e said 'e never 'ad been one o' them that thought fightin' Fritz was like takin' candy from a child. But 'e wasn't goin' to give no candy neither. Then 'e said something about 'andin' out lemons all round—you know the queer way the blokes talk. Two of them was arguin' about a brand o' cock-what-do-

you-call-'ems—you know. Them fancy drinks. All fancy and perishin' little drink. Chap tried to do one on me once down Shaftesbury Avenue way. Bit o' peel floatin' in it. Tasted like 'air-oil an' pepper. Rotten sort o' stuff."

"Seems to me," said Tim, "it's about time the Gers had their last fling. There's a lot of these Americans by all accounts."

They smoked in silence for a while, and then Curly said:

"Let's find O'Anlon an' 'ave a yarn to-night. Just the three of us, like we used to."

It had been one of their ways of spending evenings in billets. Each man told a story in turn. They found O'Hanlon sitting in an Estaminet writing.

"Yarn night to-night, Corporal," said Curly.

"Right ho!"

They left him by himself, and ordered cups of coffee.

In the evening they met in the barn. They decided that O'Hanlon should tell the first story.

O'Hanlon thought for a minute.

"This story," he said, "I got from a fellow in Bethune, while we were resting there. It's rather a curious one, I think.

It's about a man in his own Platoon. I'll try and tell it as he told it to me :

Graves was an odd-looking fellow, small, with a pinched face and wisps of drab-coloured hair that stuck out over his head, like a village yokel's hair in a play. He had a sharp nose, aggressive looking. It gave you the idea that he was always sniffing for something. One or two of them used to call him a man with a nose and some hair. He talked in a rather high voice, and he had small dark eyes that shifted and fidgeted nervously; his hands were always fidgeting too, and when he walked it looked as if his limbs might get completely out of control at any moment. When he came out with his draft everyone felt that if ever a man was born to drop his rifle on parade, it was Graves. And yet he never did. He kept still, too, when he was at attention, except for his eyes. If you looked at his eyes, you thought he must be a particularly cunning type of criminal. The sort of man who has murdered people. But his hands, and the way he walked, contradicted that idea. And then, after watching him go about his work, quietly and efficiently, it dawned on you that somehow or other he contrived to be a good soldier.

When it was time to go up to the line everyone, of course, was anxious to see how

he would turn out. That was a surprise, too. He didn't seem to take any notice of shells. He might have lived all his life under fire. Not that he did anything silly or foolhardy. He just refused to let anything interrupt him if he'd got a job on hand. One got to like him, although he never mixed much with the others and spoke little. One got to watch for his narrow shoulders scraping round a traverse, and to wonder at him as he stood on sentry, his hands fidgeting all the time.

He slept little, and in the most amazing attitudes. He would have made his fortune as a contortionist. But he never seemed to suffer from physical fatigue. He was as fresh as any man. Also, it was discovered, he could make excellent tea under any circumstances. He had a genius for making himself useful; though, naturally, it was some time before anyone would trust him with a dixie of water. He looked as if he'd spill it at once.

He could never be led on to talk about himself, and he had the quaintest way of dismissing a subject in a few words. And yet he gave the impression that those few words were a well-considered opinion. After a German attack once there was a good deal of argument on German moral, and the

quality of the German infantry.

"Fat blokes, mostly," said Graves. "No staying power."

There was a lot of tough fighting about that time. Graves was invaluable. Although he never talked much he certainly was never depressed. Where there was work to be done he was sure to be found.

One night he surpassed himself. A sniper had been giving trouble. Two men had been killed and three wounded. It was beginning to make people jumpy. Graves came forward and offered to go and put an end to the cause of the trouble.

"But," said the Sergeant, "you don't know where he is, my lad. It's a wild-goose chase."

Graves said: "I've chased wild geese afore, Sergeant. I've got a kind of a notion where he is. Been watching. Get behind him, you know. Creep up on top of him. Sudden, like. Done it in the Bush."

"In the WHAT?" said the Sergeant, absolutely astounded.

But Graves was off. He just scrambled out over the top without any hesitation. It wasn't what you'd call a bright night, but still every now and then the moon came out from behind the clouds. You couldn't tell when it would happen. It was a dangerous

sort of night. But that didn't worry Graves. He scrambled out, and crawled off. The moon was behind the clouds just then, and one couldn't watch him for long. Sure enough it shone out again presently, but Fritz didn't see him apparently. There was no firing, anyway. Well, after some time Graves came back. He had a prisoner with him. His own cheek was slashed, and his bayonet was stained.

"Had to kill the other one," he said. "Wanted to do me in, I think. Funny looking rifle, isn't it? Do you notice how the bolt—"

"Look here," said someone, "where on earth do you come from, and what the devil did you do before the war?"

"Me?" said Graves.

"Yes, you."

"I come from Little Hedding. Grand part. Know it?"

"And what was your job?"

"Never did much lately. Bad nerves you know."

"What did you do, though?"

"Me? I made dolls."

"Made dolls!"

"Yes, dolls," said Graves. "Not half bad ones. Big, you know, like that. It's curious," he said, "how interested you can

get in a thing like that. There's a lot in it. Now there's—"

"Done anything else?" someone asked him.

"Yes. Bit of fretwork. Interesting, too. Grew roses, too, once. Glorious things, roses."

"But you said something about the Bush?"

"Oh, that was long ago."

"Travelled much, then?"

"Fair. That Bush business was before I went round the Horn."

"My hat. Rough time?"

"Pretty fair. Wrecked."

"Wrecked?"

"Yes," said Graves. "That's what did my nerves in. Still sleep bad. Have to stick to pretty quiet jobs."

"How about this?" they asked.

"Well, I meant except for war coming, or anything like that. But this chap was a quiet job all right. I know a bit of German, so I explained things to him."

He looked over towards the prisoner while he was speaking, and his hands were moving about on a spade handle.

* * * * *

"That's all they ever got out of him," finished O'Hanlon. "Rum tale, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Tim. "I suppose one does run across that sort of fellow."

"Lots," said Curly, relighting his pipe. "You next."

"Remember Swamp Alley?" said Tim.

"Rather."

"Well, one day I was trying to shove along in Swamp Alley, when I heard a fellow laugh. It was a catchy sort of laugh. But it annoyed me. Like telling a joke to a drowning man. I looked up at him, and he was stuck deeper than me.

"What the hell is there to laugh at?" I said.

"What the hell else is there to do?" he asked.

"Then I had to join in. He was a small chap, and he looked pretty done up. Doggo. We had to keep more or less upright to avoid toppling over. And there was a sniper leaving cards on us. I was new to this business then, and that chap made a great impression on me. I used to think of him when I got into difficult places. But of course, after a bit, I forgot about it. I got used to things. I suppose that's the way out here.

"Well, I saw him again. It was after a hell of a fight on a road. When it was over I was trying to pick my way through all the mess. There didn't seem to be anything

alive near me, and I was fed up and tired and sick of things. I came round a corner, I remember, and found myself alongside an aid-post that had had a pretty tidy basting. Before I got a glimpse of any of the wounded I heard that laugh again. Just a note or two. I knew it at once. I felt as if someone had caught hold of my hand and told me to buck up. It was like someone saying, 'I'm in it, too. We're both in the same boat.' Well, I looked round at the stretchers and saw that little chap on one of them. His face was awful. All pain. He grinned when he saw me, but the grin ended all of a sudden. He looked about done for, but he was chatting to the man next to him. I gave him a fag and went on.

"I often thought of him after, and wondered if they managed to pull him through. He must have had a powerful sort of something about him. Personality, I suppose you call it. Anyway, I took longer to forget him this time, but of course in the end it went clean out of my mind.

"A good time after, I was back on my leave. I went out with my wife and another girl to tea at one of those corner house places one day. The two of them were sort of doing the hero-business at me. You know. Trying to get me to tell the tale about scraps

I'd been in. All that kind of thing. The music affected me I suppose, or the way these two went on flattering. Anyway, I rather spread myself about. Did the heavy. And then there was a laugh. The same old laugh again. I knew it at once. It brought back Swamp Alley and all sorts of beastly memories. I stopped talking, and looked round. I just caught sight of the little chap. He was propping the door open for a girl he was with, and he had a couple of crutches. I tell you I felt the size of nothing suddenly. I was sick of tea and music and cakes and women. 'Let's hop it,' I said, and we did.

"That's the last I saw of him, but after that I didn't forget him like the other times. I often think of that laugh still. Expect I'll run across him again one of these fine days."

They considered the story in silence for some minutes, puffing at their pipes, and then O'Hanlon said:

"It's your turn, Curly."

But Curly was asleep.

CHAPTER XV.

THE STORM THREATENS.

Walking back to their billet late one afternoon Tim and Curly came on a hollow between two ridges. Here twilight found them, and they stood on one ridge, looking down. The hollow was like a rudely-fashioned cup slowly filling with darkness, as if an enchanter were pouring strange brew into it. The ridges themselves were all bare and furrowed and torn. Shells had beaten them shapeless. The two men followed the narrow track that led through the hollow, and as they came down they saw a few maimed trees and a little fence that enclosed a cemetery. There was nothing else there but the ruin of earth and trees and the buried remains of men.

"It's a cemetery," said Tim.

"Yes," said Curly. "Let's have a dekko."

They unlatched a low gate and passed through on to a neat pathway. Before them there were lines of unadorned mounds. At the head of each mound there was a wooden cross, inscribed with black letters. Sometimes a relic had been placed there, a hat or a water-bottle or even a few flowers. The names on some of the crosses were French, and Tim wondered in a vague way at the power that could bring two nations so close together. Curly beckoned him to a grave further on and pointed to a name.

"Remember 'im up at Hooge?"

"Should think I do!"

"'E could fight."

"That he could."

"It was all a kind o' sport to 'im, you know. That sort allus stops one."

In this manner, though in a different speech, warriors in old times might have spoken together of a lost comrade. And some great man would have made a funeral oration over his resting place. But these two spoke only of Private Tom Jennings; just plain Tom Jennings, who could fight. When men talk of a friend in that way, one knows one is face to face with that mystery we call tradition. Even so dead men become part of a regiment's tradition. Others live up to the ideal that guided those who went

before them. The uplifting impulse of an hour, passing like a great wind over England, had swept into Tom Jenning's neat Surrey parlour, into his neat life, into his neat mind, and had blown the grocer's shop and all his thoughts topsy-turvy. He is the Tom Jennings who fought at Loos, at Neuve Chapelle; in front of the Thiepval Plateau, and at Messines Ridge. To-day his name may be read on an illuminated scroll that is framed over the lych-gate of his village church.

They left him there in the hollow, and climbing the second ridge threaded their way over holes and old wire and crumbling trenches to the village where they were billeted. They found an atmosphere of hot discussion when they arrived. It was chiefly about a German offensive. Apparently all the papers were forecasting something big. In fact it was to be the biggest thing yet.

"'The last throw of the dice,' they say 'ere," said one man, tapping a headline with his forefinger.

"Suppose it was the last," said Tim. "Good Lord! Imagine it failing, and then the whole show being over. What will it be like to be out of it all."

"Now then," growled Curly, "we don't want no tamperin' with the morale of the

British Army. If there's another show comin', it's comin'. If there isn't, it isn't, that's all there is to it. Fritz 'as got to do something for 'is livin'. 'E can't just sit there for ever, like 'is damned fleet. One side's got to bring this job to a head, an' if it's Fritz, all the better, because 'e'll lose more men."

That was how Tim first began to think of the great German offensive. And he thought of it as a matter of taking a trench or defending a trench, with a bit of marching in between, and not much sleep or food. That is how they thought of it, nearly all of them; for the soldier in the trenches has no time to look beyond at the wider aspect. He does not see things in perspective. Talk of Paris and the Channel Ports and Amiens—well, after all, that was just more fighting. His business is simply with a few sandbags, a firestep, a fragment of trench.

That night Tim had a letter from Meg, and it said a good deal about the rumours that were all over London. It was in all the papers, she said. It cropped up in casual conversations. People in tea-places talked about it. People, she said, seemed to take it for granted that the real crisis of the war was coming. They seemed to think everything would go all right. Soldiers said it

was going to be pretty bad, but could only end one way. Nobody thought it would be over in a day or two, or without ground being lost.

Grania wrote about it too, to O'Hanlon, a few days later.

"London," she wrote, "seems to be thinking aloud. You can't get away from the atmosphere of expectation. It's taken for granted that the Boche is going to have one last try. You can imagine people lying awake at night, in the dark, thinking. Somehow one daren't imagine it over. It would kill us with joy."

Even Curly's wife wrote about it.

"I hope," she wrote, "as they won't get half a knocking if they come."

Soldiers on leave in England were besieged with questions.

"We know all about it," they said. "We're ready."

One day Tim's Colonel lectured to the Battalion behind the lines.

"You have all discussed among yourselves," he said, "this coming offensive. It's sure to come. We're not blind. We've seen it coming, and we know, as they know, that it's their only chance. They've got to force a decision somehow or other before the Americans get ready. It won't be a joke,

men. We've been through pretty bad things together, and I don't think we've ever been silly enough to underrate the Boche. He can fight all right. And he's in deadly earnest now. It'll be much worse than anything we've been up against before. But whatever it's like, we've got to stick it, until he's played out. Then our turn will come. The line's sure to give in places. That's got to happen in modern war in any fighting on a large scale. The front line will give, probably, but they'll never break the spirit that makes that line a living thing. They'll never break our armies. Remember that, if things go wrong at first. If Fritz bastes your trenches out of shape and knocks villages to bits, well, that won't win the war for him. There's a little phrase I've heard a lot among you people. It rather appeals to me. I think you'll recognize it. Are—we —downheart—."

The last syllable was broken off and buried under a yell of "No!"

"Seems it really is coming, then," said Tim.

"Now, for Gawd's sake," said Curly, "don't go muckin' about in your mind an' philosophyin', an' all that stuff. Leave that to the blokes what's sittin' in chairs and writin' great fat 'istories of all this business."

"Poor old Curly. You have a lot of trouble with me, don't you?"

"If you was my son I'd 'ave 'ad you tanned and sent to sea in a fishin' smack, my lad. I'd learn you."

They had a long spell in the line some days after the lecture, and everyone wondered if the offensive would start, and if it did whether their particular bit of line would "catch it." They half hoped that it would start. Waiting was trying to the nerves. But nothing extraordinary happened. It was the old tale of bombardments, alarms, gas-shells, rations, mud, wearyness.

"I allus was a romantic kind o' bloke," said Curly, "an' I can sort of feel something's goin' to 'appen in a few weeks. I 'ad that feelin' afore I was married. Told you about that, didn't I?"

There were the usual trivial details that rub the edges off one's nerves; meetings of parties in a narrow trench; perpetual filling of sandbags; dull hours of sentry-go.

One night the Germans attempted a trench-raid. Tim, on sentry, peering over the sandbags into the darkness of No Man's Land, was aware of something that might have been the trunk of a tree, only it had not been there before. He was sure of that. Suddenly it moved. Other figures moved,

too. Quietly and quickly Tim passed down the alarm and the men stood to. They waited, each man with his finger at the trigger. It was like waiting for the start of a race. Tim recalled a race he had taken part in years ago on Putney Heath, in the days when he had been something of a runner. The figures advanced. There was no mistaking the stealthy movement of men. There was a ripple of fire from the trench, and the Germans decided not to proceed with their raid.

"These beggars," said Curly, "don't seem to me to get any sport out o' their fightin'. It's a sort o' duty with 'em, I suppose. They're all right while things are going well. They're bad losers, though. Now it's often seemed to me as 'ow all of us 'as a different way o' scrappin', as you might say. The Gerblighter goes into it like a dog what's been licked and bullied. 'E'll stick it out a bit, but only 'cause 'e's fair scared stiff to chuck 'is 'and in. 'E knows there's them as'll reckon with 'im when it's all over. 'E fights in a sort of fear, as I figure it, as much fear of 'is own blokes as of us. Then there's the Parlez-vous, well, 'e goes into it like a blinkin' knight in armour and stuff, romance and glory and all that—not but what I'm not more'n a bit romantic myself. 'E

can fight like 'ell, the Parlez-vous. It's almost a sort of religion, like, with 'im. 'E sings fine songs, with fine music, stirrin' stuff—the Ger sings fine stuff, too—but we blokes, we just want a song about wild women or roses o' love—more 'omely, kind of. We go into it rather like a game o' football. Stamford Bridge crowd, every time, an' the odds is a blood-orange. We may not 'ave 'igh souls, but we can fight all right. No flamin' flies on us."

"You ought to write a book one of these days," said Tim.

"Course I ought. But I can't. It's not always them that sees things, right up against, that 'as the gift of writin' about 'em. It's often just a chap sittin' still imaginin' things. Perhaps it's as well, 'cause you couldn't 'ave blokes writin' out the sort of things what actually 'appens—specially in war. Take this job, for instance, out 'ere. You can't go writin' down the words we use. You'd 'ave Bishops and things excommunicatin' the Army, and old ladies writin' to the papers, an' all kinds of a flare-up. Now if I sat down to write a book, I'd want to shove in all what I saw. No cuttin' out. Wouldn't do, though; leastways not for drawin'-rooms. It's much better for them as don't 'ave to fight to just

go on thinkin' war's much about the same as afore. Let 'em think of us with swords and shields and chargers and things, if it 'elps 'em. Let 'em think of us dyin' for the old country. It won't do them no good to see us 'uddled up in the muck, cold and 'ungry and pretty near busted."

"Curly," said Tim, "what made you 'list?"

"What makes anyone 'list, or do anything? There's things as makes a chap do things. 'E can't tell why. I think the bands and the colours and all that got me. I saw the way girls looked at the Guards comin' up the Mall. I expect it was that. Allus was a romantic chap. May 'ave bin something in my blood, too. I read in a book once that adventure and all that kind of thing was in every bloke's blood, 'cause of the Stone age, or whatever they call it. The writer chap said it was there all right, kind o' sleepin', only chaps went and shut theirselves up in rotten cities an' towns, an' sat indoors, an' got all un'ealthy, like. Lot in it, I think. Who wants to die in a room? People sobbin' round. Coffins, an' all that. Medicine. Ugh! Hate it."

"I don't think it's in my blood," said Tim. "I want to settle. Adventure's all right—small doses of it. But I want to

settle quiet somewhere. Don't know quite what I want to do. I suppose cut hair. I was trained to it. Someone's got to cut hair and shave people. There's no adventure in it, but so long as you're happy, and people round you are happy, well, everything's all serene. I'd like to see foreign parts, but quietly. Just quietly. Believe I'm a quiet bloke by nature. And you can't beat England for that sort o' bloke. Kent's full of 'em, and Sussex, too. An' yet, when anything's doing, they're as good as anyone."

"That may be all right for you, mate. A chap can't alter the way 'e's born, I s'pose. But it must be mighty 'ard to stick this little lot, if you're like that."

"It is," said Tim.

"Now then, now then; I didn't say that to go an' encourage you to 'ave another weepin' fit."

"I'll tell your something," said Tim, and paused.

"Fire ahead, son."

"I'm—I'm going to be a father."

Curly was silent for a time, puffing at his pipe. He looked ill at ease, he who was never disturbed.

"That's different," he said. "I may 'ave said 'ard things, mate. Forget 'em. I know. I 'ad a son once. 'E died. Nothin'

I'd like as much as a son. Believe I'd want to settle if I 'ad one, straight I do. Oh, I dunno, though."

Tim read through again a long letter from Meg that night. More than ever he wished he could be at home with her now. Curled up on the firestep he thought of all the boys' names he knew, and then, in case of accidents, as he put it, the girls' names. Curly was nodding over the brazier inside a rough shelter, droning to himself.

And then the shelling began. Just a burst of it at first, and then a crescendo. Tim slipped to the bottom of the trench and huddled his knees up. They were going wide, he said to himself, listening to the concussions. Quite wide. They were raining down far behind the parados. "Trying for the supports," said Tim, but corrected his impression later. The shells were not going far enough over for that. He listened to the whining. The air was full of it. Some earth sprayed down into the trench to the left. A cascade of earth to the right; and two or three sandbags toppled grotesquely from the parapet. Range altered, evidently. The shells began to fall shorter. They were coming down on No Man's Land now, behind the parapet.

"Must be trying for us," he said to Curly

"Expect so, son."

They were coming nearer now, and nearer. They were dropping too close to the parapet. The earth was being tossed high into the air. The trench was slipping in in one or two places. "And no dugout," thought Tim.

An officer came up the trench.

"Make yourselves as small as possible," he said. "It's going to be unhealthy to-night."

Curly sat under his waterproof sheet by the side of the brazier and smoked. Tim hunched his knees up higher and kept his hands ready to shield his face. Further down the trench, somewhere in the next bay, he heard O'Hanlon giving an order. A few feet away from them another man was lying flat against the wall of the trench. A shell burst in the air and a jagged piece of shrapnel embedded itself in the parados. Tim got up and picked it out. It was hot. He went back to his place and sat down again. Then he lit a cigarette.

There was not much shrapnel after that, but the shells were screaming and raving at the trench. Just a rut in the ground, thought Tim. What must the Power be like that stands between a man and Death at a time like this, he thought. A great slice of trench was blown in. The parapet shook.

Tim felt the trembling. The very ground was quivering. He began to pray. It was a curious prayer. Prayers are, on occasions like that. He prayed the same thing over and over again. He made promises to God for the future, and prayed on and on.

He put two wads in his ears. And then something very weird, a picture, flashed through his mind. He saw the quiet areas behind the lines. So very near there was peace, a few hundred yards away. Even in the support lines men were probably writing letters, singing, joking. "They're getting it in the neck up there," someone would say. He imagined the noise villagers would hear behind the lines. Men lying in billets would turn in their sleep and thank Heaven they weren't in the line. The next morning they'd talk about it—and the next morning there'd be dead in the trench—up and down—everywhere. Safety so near; and something spiritual that kept a man chained there. Nothing physical could have made men stay, surely. He tried to imagine a man held down among trees in a thunderstorm. He wouldn't ever risk that with lightning about. He'd fight. And yet, here he was. He only had to get out and run. A few yards of danger, and then safety. But he knew he would stay. They'd all stay. Naturally.

He began to pray again, aloud. Curly heard him, and turned his head towards the brazier. Tim had a quaint idea that God wouldn't hear him above all this noise. Someone was moaning on his left. A tremendous concussion made him bury his head in his hands. He wondered if this were the end. The earth went down his neck. At his side the trench came tumbling in, sandbags and all. He rolled clear. On his left the moaning had stopped. He reached for his spade and got up, and began to dig. Vaguely he knew that Curly was working beside him. He dug and dug until the body was uncovered. "Can't do nothing," said Curly, "'e's na poo. Get back and lie low."

Tim put the spade down and picked it up again mechanically. He sat down again and waited. Curly went back to the brazier.

Hours passed that were like years. Dawn came. An aeroplane hovered overhead, like a strange bird, and then made off. The shelling continued. The trench was rags of earth and bodies. O'Hanlon came along, walking as if he were very tired.

"Here's some bread and jam," he said. "Better eat something."

Tim smiled at him.

"Got it all right this time," he said.

" Pretty awful," said O'Hanlon. "Mike's dead, and Sweeny and Cole and Bentham. A few in the other sections. Not as many as you'd think. Just look at the trench. Don't go down there. It's beastly. Someone building up the parapet in the night has beaten a man flat into it, bits of him. My God! If we get clear—!"

He passed on down the trench. When he had gone, Tim thought " If we get clear—!"

And then something happened. Tim wouldn't believe it at first. He didn't believe it until he jumped up and heard the shells going well over. They were bursting along the support line. They might come back, but for a few minutes it was over. Over. He wanted to shout out " I'm alive!" It was all too wonderful. Curly crept out from beside the brazier.

" I suppose this is the beginning of their show," said Tim.

" Yes," said Curly, looking round at the ruins of the trench. " Better start buildin' this lot up again afore 'e comes back."

Then it was that Tim realized he had been holding his spade all the time. He had broken his nails on it. His right hand was numb with the force of his grip.

They worked for a short time, and then Death came back again.

"Oh, my God!" said Tim. "Another basting."

"This'll be 'is last go, son," said Curly.

It was the same story over again. Once a shell landed in the very trench, two bays away from Tim. He saw the earth go up like a fountain, and a twisting body whirled out into No Man's Land. Tim learnt afterwards that it was the Platoon Commander who had been blown up. Each side of Tim the trench was blown in. He moved. He had heard that two shells never fall in the same spot. He was to learn that no man can lay down a theory for shell-fire. Two and three and four shells pounded the same mass of earth into fresh shapes.

In the afternoon he and Curly ate some bread and jam and drank a little water from their bottles.

"Nothin' like food," said Curly.

"And sleep," said Tim.

"All in good time, mate. That'll come all right."

Towards evening the order came to withdraw to the support lines, and Tim wondered if he would be killed on the way out. That was just how it happened so often. He'd known cases. He collected his things and fell in behind Curly. O'Hanlon took command of the Platoon. One sergeant had

been killed and the other wounded. They passed down the trench, bending low when they had to climb over mounds of earth. Often they had to tread on bodies, and once Tim slipped, and his hands came into contact with soft pulp, cold. In another place he saw a boot and a leg up to the knee, with the puttee on it, sticking out from the earth. He saw worse things than that. He saw things that cannot be written down even in a book of war. His nerves were so shattered that perhaps they were incapable of any further shock. He felt only slightly the familiar physical sickness. He could not even rouse himself to the joy that he wanted to feel. In his soul it was dark night, until Curly began to sing. It made things seem human and funny again when Curly began to sing. Change of mood is swift in war. Danger was over for the moment at any rate.

Tim forgot that he had prayed.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STORM BREAKS.

Like a storm the German offensive broke. For some time it had been in the air, and now that it had come there was a kind of relief. The roads behind the lines were packed with men and lorries. Tim and Curly stood at the door of their billet listening to the guns. It was like giants slamming immense doors in empty mansions that gave back a hollow echo. And the noise never ceased. Tim wondered if it was anything like that bombardment of a few days before. Across a broad plain a column of horses went towards the setting sun. The air was still, and one could hear on a background, so to speak, of distant gun-fire, the words of a song that a Battalion was singing on a road away to the right. The tune came across fields veiled in twilight. O'Hanlon, listening, was reminded of the song of a ploughboy, coming across many

acres. It was the same tune, and it filled his mind with England.

Twilight deepened. There was a star among tumbled gray clouds. It showed like a light on stormy waters. A peasant woman was leaning against the door of a cottage, looking out towards a small wood. Gray smoke, a deeper tint than the twilight mist, hung round the bare trees. The Germans were searching for British batteries. A little wind rose. One heard the chattering of a machine gun, faint in the distance. Over a ridge a Battalion came marching back from the line. Men working by a roadside turned to look at them, leaning on their spades. A voice shouted, and there was a burst of laughter.

Later, a Battalion marched into the village and halted.

"Where you been?" said Tim to one of them.

"Collectin' butterflies, o' course."

"What part, I mean?"

"There." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Don't know what it's called. I call it Hell."

"It's started, then? Are they attacking yet?"

"Just started, We've 'ad a taste. They're askin' for it this time, an' no mistake."

The Battalion fell in and marched away again.

"Be a pretty big go, Curly," said Tim.

Curly said nothing.

"They got crowds of men from Russia, according to the papers."

Curly turned his head.

"Look 'ere, son," he said, "you bin crammin' yourself with that paper muck again. Polertics an' geography an' all that. All you got to do is sit tight. Leave the gassin' to the blokes in Parliament an' the newspaper chaps. They got to do something. Speeches 'ave to be made, I s'pose, an' papers got to be filled. Nobody pretends this 'ere's goin' to be a joke; but you done your target practice. If we know they're comin', you can bet your sweet life them as runs the 'ole caboodle knows it too. We're ready all right. Look at all this gear be'ind the line."

"Suppose they think they'll surprise us."

"Most likely. They don't get much change out of us, I bet. But, as I keep sayin', it won't be no 'oliday."

"It may end in one," said Tim.

And they both winked solemnly.

Night came on, and the guns seemed to be under the ground. Far and wide over the country the darkness was pricked with flame. Coloured lights shot up into the air, remained

poised a second, sank slowly to earth. There came a droning overhead. Someone blew a whistle. Tim and Curly walked towards a deep shelter at the back of their barn. As they went Tim saw young women with children in their arms, and quite old women, running down the road. They had their allotted shelters. A bomb fell in a field and did not explode. A second shook the ground. The droning came nearer and then circled round; two, three, four bombs dropped in quick succession.

"Trying for the dump out there," said Curly.

There was a whistling in the air, coming nearer and nearer; the whistling changed to the roaring of a furnace. There was a rending sound, and then the splitting of wood and the thud of falling fragments. Something whistled by outside the shelter and struck against a wall.

"Our barn, I reckon, that last hit," said Tim.

They crouched down in the darkness, and presently the droning moved away. There was a sound of bombs in the distance.

When they came out of the shelter and returned to their barn they found that one wall had collapsed. Bits of wood lay all round. The door had been blown off its

hinges and there was a deep hole a few feet from it.

These night raids were so frequent that the men were glad to go back to the line, especially as during the last few nights the German guns had begun to shell the village. Two nights before they left the billets something happened which made a lasting impression on Tim. There had been heavy shelling one evening. The men were just sitting still and cursing. Somebody held up his hand. They listened. A faint droning, like some giant insect of night, was coming towards them from the rear. It was the sound they had been hoping to hear.

"The 'planes," said Tim.

"That's the stuff to give 'em," said Curly.

The machines passed over, making for the German lines, and some time after the shelling died down.

"Got 'em," said one man.

They began to settle themselves for the night. Tim fell into a doze, and was roused by that droning sound again. It was coming nearer, and grew quite loud.

"Must be coming down," thought Tim. "Hit, likely enough."

He went to the door of the barn and could make out a machine heading for the ground,

evidently intending to land in the field at the edge of the village. Tim listened, and presently the pilot came down the road. He stopped at the officers' mess. Tim saw that his arm was roughly bandaged. Two officers came out of the mess, which was some twenty yards from the barn.

"Anyone see to this for me?" said the pilot.

A subaltern went in to fetch the M.O., who came out and bound up the arm.

"You quieted those blighters all right," said the M.O.

"What?" said the pilot.

"I say you managed to put the tin hat on their shelling."

"Who?"

"Why, the beggars who've been putting it across us."

"Oh, yes. Have they stopped?"

"Of course. Wasn't that the idea?"

"Lord, no!" said the pilot. "We were out after a dump behind the lines. Got it, too, and a railway siding as well."

"Well—" said the M.O., puzzled.

"Well, I expect the chaps who were shelling you got the wind up a bit when they heard us coming. Thought we were after their blood. Guilty consciences."

"That must have been it," said the subaltern.

"Sort of killed two birds with one stone," said the pilot. "British prestige, and all that sort of stuff. The old flag, never be slaves. Cheer-ho! must get back to the old 'bus again. Many thanks."

The last afternoon in billets Tim spent in writing to Meg. He told her that every cloud had a silver lining, even a war-cloud. He said he expected they'd be back again home one of these days. Not so very long now. When he had finished writing he began to run over a list of boys' names again in his mind.

Trouble was over them from the moment they left the billets for the line. Their way lay through a countryside that was all shell-holes, and there were "crumps" coughing round them all the time. They lost men before ever they reached the trenches. They passed dead horses and broken lorries and here and there a tank that had foundered or been disabled. At one point a house lay crumbled all across their track. A French civilian in a corduroy blouse stared up from masonry. His dead face was powdered with dust. Word came back after they had marched a long way that they were to go to a certain point and dig in. The Boche was through. Yes, that was all the news. He was through, but no one quite knew where, or

what the significance of it was. Was it a real break-through?

They came to the place where they were to dig in. They had to pass through a village first. They understood that they were to defend that village, that their trenches were to run across its front, outside it. Other men were digging on their right.

A staff car dashed into the village. Stray shells were dropping among the houses. Tim, passing the car, saw a staff officer jump out and make for a house. In a flash he recognized the man. He saw at once a big house half-way up Putney Hill. He used to go there to shave an old man who was an invalid, and the boy used to come in.

They marched on to the edge of the village. In a desolate field they started to dig. They understood there was not much time. They were to dig for all they were worth. Put their backs into it. An old night on some downs came back to Tim's mind, and people firing blank. He'd wondered what real bullets would be like. Nowhere to go back for the night, and no cocoa. Coo! Cocoa would be wonderful now. He dug, and Curly dug by his side, sucking at his empty pipe. "No smoking" had been passed down, and "No noise." Something seemed to be happening in front. There was a lot of

firing; star-shells were going up. The men on the right had almost dug deep enough for protection. Tim thought his hole would never be deep enough. It didn't seem to get any deeper. He must have been at it for hours, he thought. Curly's was much better.

Presently he saw ahead a mass of hurrying figures. They were doubling. For a second he wondered if it was the Germans. Then he realized. Lord, that was bad, our people retiring. It was the first time he'd seen anything like that. He'd seen withdrawals, but this looked odd. As they came nearer he saw that they were running in the way that spent men run, wobbling all over the place. They weren't in fours. The officers were alongside, glancing at them all the time. There was quite an old man there. Must be the Colonel. Word came down to get in touch, and Tim saw the men stop running and face about. They began at once to dig in. All along the line earth was being thrown up. Tim dug harder. He was sweating now, and his fingers began to ache. Must be like Mons, he thought. He wondered if it was really bad, as bad as it seemed. Almost in direct answer to him there came a whirlwind of firing.

"Down," said Curly. "Machine guns."

Tim crouched into his hole, scraping all

the time with his entrenching tool. The bullets whisked by over his head. He wondered when they would stop. There was a shout near him. It began as a shout and ended in a groan that seemed to come out of someone's very stomach. The bullets stopped coming over. Tim got up and dug again. Away on the left men were lying flat. They had no holes yet, and the machine guns had evidently been turned on them.

A man came up from the village with a message.

"Hell of a smash there," he said to Tim. "Staff car bust to splinters. Staff officer chap lying near the wheel. Young fellow."

"Tall?" said Tim. "Fair hair?"

"That's him. Seen him?"

"Yes," said Tim, and he thought of an old man sitting in an invalid's chair. Someone would bring him bad news. They'd come in quietly to his room, half afraid to tell him. They'd beat about the bush, until he suspected something. Tim went on digging, with thoughts running up and down his mind. It was pitch dark, and it began to rain. His hole was fairly deep now, and he felt more secure. He overhauled his rifle, and wiped some mud off the stock with a piece of rag.

"They'll probably wait till just afore

dawn," said Curly. "We can get on joinin' up these holes."

So they started to join up the holes, working face to face. It was the best way to keep warm, Tim realized, for the cold rain began to cut into his cheeks and hands. He kept looking up to the East to see if the night were nearly over. Something would be bound to happen then, surely. Orders came down not to fire; a patrol was going out on the right. "Not much of a job," thought Tim.

The rain drove slant-wise against him. His clothes were wet through. He could feel the water through his breeches at the knees. It ran down the front of his tunic and gathered into big drops that dripped down. His helmet dripped at the back. Everything dripped. He pulled a hunk of bread out and started eating, and while he was eating looked up to the East again. Dawn was standing on the threshold, waiting to steal in. He watched the patch of steel-grey grow and grow. The patrol was in now. Anything might happen. It would be better to have a fight than to go on digging. His hands and arms ached, and his eyes were sore from want of sleep. It was just that chill time when one's manhood is tested to the core. Tim could almost have wept with utter

physical misery. To his very bones he was frozen, and he felt desperately hungry. Something warm to drink. That would have altered the situation. Just a rum ration.

Dawn came, and the Germans. The machine guns began again, and infantry marched over the sky line, good targets for the watchful gunners. The men in the trenches waited, and then began to fire. They fired rapidly, for it was a question of killing quickly. They had a feeling that there was nothing behind them. If it came to close quarters and they were beaten back, there was no knowing where it would end. There was a lot of talk about Channel Ports and Amiens. Well, that must be the meaning of all this. So they fired as hard as they could, and there was no lack of targets. They were firing and reloading and firing, satisfied that the Boche was getting a warm reception, when something went wrong. Far away to the right, apparently, the line had bent again. There were orders to withdraw to trenches behind the village, trenches that were holes hastily dug during the night by troops in support. They were to hinder the attackers as much as they could in the village.

Looking at a map, afterwards, Tim realized the meaning of what was then such a mystery. He saw how the village was

practically surrounded, and an officer explained why they had to withdraw.

So back they went, with a storm of bullets at their heels. As he went Tim saw guns moving back. He looked round. One Company had been left to cover the withdrawal. They were to stay till the last minute. He saw them firing into the Germans. In a small hollow on one side of the village a British battery was firing with open sights at the German infantry. He saw the gunners at work, and heard an officer shouting an order.

Then they began to double, until they came to the beginnings of the village. Tim saw Lewis gunners high up in a house. O'Hanlon was shouting something. He was disposing men at intervals behind a remnant of wall. Tim found himself in a small garden. He knelt on the earth behind a big green shutter, resting his rifle on the top of some bricks that had fallen from the house. There was firing all round him, and he began to fire, too. He could see field-gray uniforms stretching out to left and right, as far as his sight could carry. Bullets were flicking overhead. He could hear them cracking against walls and bits of masonry. It was like the crack of a circus-master's long whip. There seemed to be big gaps in the advancing line of Germans, but

he could see other troops coming over the sky-line. A battery rattled into the village, passed down the street, stopped, and opened fire. The shells went high over the first waves of field-gray, and burst far back. Tim could just see the earth going up in little clouds.

There were more bullets now. Men were being hit again. The order came to get back into the first few houses on the outskirts. Tim got off his knee and walked back, keeping his head low, across the forlorn little garden. He and Curly took up position in a ground-floor room. Each found a reasonably small hole in the outer wall for his rifle.

"Bit of a mess up, isn't it?" said Tim.

"I reckon it's goin' to be a real rough 'ouse when they get into this village," said Curly.

Shells were whining high over the buildings, bursting on the other side of the village. Tim and Curly began to fire again. O'Hanlon was kneeling behind a heap of bricks under an empty window-frame. Next to him an officer was loading a rifle. They could see British shells falling close now, among the lines of men in rear of the first waves. The front waves had closed in and massed together. They were coming on quicker now. It was odd to see a man fall

here and there. There was nothing to do but just go on firing and firing all the time. It didn't stop the advance, but at any rate it took toll, and worried them. They broke into a double when they came within fifty yards of the village. Some of them raced for the old wall that had served the British as shelter. They got down and fired from the other side of it. Others came on past them with fixed bayonets. Two men were in the garden. They both went over together, shot dead. Others followed. They were right up to the houses. Tim heard, almost subconsciously, a Lewis gun rapping. He fired point-blank into someone's face. Then he shortened his rifle and drew it back, his right hand just over the hip.

The next minute the Germans were inside the house. There was a scrambling fight among the rubble. "Just delay them as long as possible," the company commander had said, "then slip back a bit. Make them fight for every inch." Tim glanced round. He swung the butt of his rifle. It caught a thick-set man between neck and shoulder. Then he looked round again and took one flying leap through a window-opening. He landed on all fours outside, and the brick fragments cut his knees. He scrambled up. Something grazed the sleeve of his right arm.

He lowered his head and ran across a yard with a yawning hole in the middle of it. He crossed the yard and entered another house. He crouched down beside some Lewis gunners and found he was trembling, and decided that he'd left that last business a bit too long. He looked at his coat sleeve. There was a clean hole through it, a neat ring with a black edge.

The Germans had a footing in the village now, and more of them were coming on behind. The British were firing from every crevice and corner. Foot by foot they were forced back, as house after house was rushed. One party was fighting desperately down a muddy side street; they had fortified themselves behind scraps of lorry and furniture, and they had some bombs there. Tim stayed beside the Lewis gunners till they withdrew, and found himself, after that, firing round the corner of a house. In front of it were the remains of a staff car, and the body of the young staff officer lay near one of the wheels, just as it had fallen, the head resting on an outstretched left arm. A little further back there was a mine-crater in the middle of the street. Wire had been thrown out hastily in front of it. To this stronghold the Lewis gunners came, and Tim joined them again. For a long time they held out

here, having the attackers at a disadvantage. They held out in fact until it grew dark and the street was a shambles; until the Germans decided to withdraw to the edge of the village and reorganize for another attempt.

There was no sleep that night. Tim worked hard. They all worked, knowing that there would be little time to make the best of their scattered positions. While one party worked another would keep watch, and in this manner they relieved each other. Tim took his turn on sentry, and gazed into the silent darkness ahead. Far away on the right fighting was still going on. All night one could hear it. Presently firing broke out again on the left. They were evidently coming again. Tim pulled the gauze through his rifle and smeared some oil on the bolt. He had not seen Curly or O'Hanlon or any of his section for a long time. Perhaps they were prisoners. Perhaps they were dead lying out there in the street, or badly wounded, stranded between attackers and defenders. The firing on the left had shifted. It was no longer directly to the left but came from half-left. It sounded as if there had been a British counter-attack there; maybe the Germans had been driven back some way.

Then troops came marching into the village

from the rear. It was reinforcements coming up. There was to be a counter-attack. The Germans must be thrown out of the village. On the right the night had gone badly. The Germans were outflanking, said a runner. But he'd heard that on the left the Jocks had shoved Fritz back.

While the counter-attack was being organized the Germans upset all plans. They came suddenly. They seemed to be right into the village everywhere, so that it was mostly bayonet work, man to man. There were encounters in corners, in broken-down doorways. Two or three men, banded together, would fight until they were surrounded and then die fighting. And meanwhile in the rear men were coming back from shelters and piles of bricks to make the last stand. There was only one more place to hold on; a few old cottages at the end of the village. It could only be a matter of half-an-hour anyhow. The crater was overrun. The Boche was well into his stride.

They collected round those last cottages doggedly, and prepared to inflict as much damage as possible before they were driven out. Very few of the Lewis gunners had succeeded in getting back. One could only guess what had happened to them and their guns. Tim chose a position behind an old

cart that someone had dragged out of a yard. He was not afraid now. He couldn't even imagine being afraid. He was only curiously sad, trying to arrange his thoughts, attempting to justify what he felt sure was going to happen. Was it really so glorious as the papers would say it was? He supposed it must be, but perhaps a fellow who was in it couldn't possibly see it like that. After all it was the end of life, and beyond that what did one know for certain? One knew for certain that life was pleasant. God! how pleasant! Tim realized it then, and again began to pray, but this time it was not in terror. Then he thought of Curly and O'Hanlon. Where were they? It all seemed so purposeless. The three of them lying stark wouldn't win the war, wouldn't even stop air-raids on London.

He was called out of his thoughts by someone moving beside him. He looked up, and wondered why the Germans hadn't got there yet. Slowly it dawned on him that something had happened. Half-left and half-right there were furious outbursts of firing. The Germans seemed to have gone back. All was still in the crater ahead. The man moving beside Tim got up.

"Come on, my old brown son," he shouted, "we've bust 'em sure as eggs. We've got

right round the bastards. 'Ark. It's the Jocks on the right."

Men came out of their hiding places from every side, and ran down a side street and out into a field beyond. Here there was the sound of bombs. A man came limping back.

" What's on?" said Tim.

" Got 'em cold," said the man. "Munsters come up just now on the right and let go at 'em an 'ell of a counter. They're closin' in this way. Fritz'll 'ave to get a move on, or 'e'll be caught in this goddam village."

Tim ran on. Dawn was beginning, and looking back to his left he could see the village on a line with him, a few hundred yards away. Shells were going far over, the British guns were putting down a barrage on the old German lines.

Tim noticed men from two or three different regiments round him. There was no one that he knew. And then they stumbled in amongst the Irish troops, who were sweeping round on the village. They were lying on the ground, getting their breath before going on again. Tim decided to go on with them. So did the rest. And those were moments of real exhilaration when he found himself going at a slow double towards the firing, and after a time he saw that they were making for the trenches that his own

Battalion had dug. There was a short, sharp fight, but the Germans had had enough, and they surrendered in large numbers.

When he had settled in the trench Tim tried to find out where his regiment was. On the left, he was told, so he marched off again. He got out behind the trench and went back to the village. There, in the growing light, he looked at the faces of many dead men, and did not know whether to be glad or not when he did not find what he dreaded. He passed by the wall behind which they had made their first stand, went through the small garden, where there were many bodies. He did not mind looking at them now, and he wondered if he was getting hardened to horrors. He passed from the garden out into fields, leaving the village behind him, and after long wandering found his regiment and his own Platoon. He hung about in a bay with men of another Platoon. He did not dare to ask them questions or to go and see for himself.

He was preparing to risk everything when he heard a sound that made him want to fling his helmet high in the air. Curly, singing in what someone called a whole bunch of keys, came round the traverse.

"Anyone seen—?" he said, and paused.

"'Ullo!" he continued. "Just lookin' for you. You bin off on your travels?"

"I was just looking for you, too," said Tim.

"Well, 'ere we are again."

"Where's O'Hanlon?" said Tim quite quickly.

"Round there. Fit as a fiddle. Writin' 'ero tales to 'is girl."

"Then we're all through it," said Tim. "Lucky devils we are. Let's have a song for the lord's sake. Something. Anything."

They went away to find O'Hanlon, and when they came upon him and he looked up from his paper, he got up and shook Tim's hand.

And I think it ought to be recorded somewhere in the national archives that a barber, a soldier, and a poet once sang, together, and flat, and with imperfect rythm, on a battlefield, a song whose refrain asked "What's the good of a knight without a lady?"

CHAPTER XVII.

BACKS TO THE WALL.

On that night, some hours after Tim had joined his Platoon, the Battalion was relieved. Fresh men were brought into the line, for everyone knew that the Germans would not rest for long. They spent the time until the relief came in answering and asking questions. Tim related all that had happened to him.

"And you, Curly? What happened to you?" he said.

"When I got separated from our lot," said Curly, "I kind o' wandered about the place, firin' when I saw a good chance, and gettin' in a bit o' bayonet work now and then I knew we was in for a proper rough 'ouse. Three chaps was shot next me, shot clean bust-o, but some'ow or other they didn't get me. I found some blokes from a Scotch crowd, and wandered off along o' them.

Warmed myself with a lick o' rum, and then what should 'appen but me to find myself in another show, out on the right there. The Jocks fair put it acrorst 'em, an' I'm not kiddin' to you. Then me an' two other chaps came down this way. I found the rest of 'em 'ere. Nobody seemed to know damn-all about you. One bloke said 'e'd seen you 'it, that was all."

"Nearly was," said Tim. "Look at this, mate."

And he showed his sleeve with the bullet-hole through it.

"Thought you was goin' to say you was one o' them chaps what escapes by a souvenir from some girl or someone. You know them things in the magazines. 'Dear sir, if it 'adn't a bin for your mos' excellent woollen socks the shell would 'ave laid me low.' Or, 'darlin' Kate, tell mother 'er cake saved me. A bullet struck it an' broke, otherwise I'd a bin na poo.' Then there's a photograph of a lump o' cake. X marks the passage o' the bullet. You know."

"And what happened to you, Sergeant?" said Tim.

"I?" said O'Hanlon, "I got in rather a bad place. I managed to keep with our lot, and in the end we fought our way out. It was a sort of back-yard, and they cornered us.

Near thing, I can tell you. Never expected to come out alive. They killed Fred there."

They marched wearily back from the line, but they guessed that there would be little time to recuperate. Bad news came from all sides. The most optimistic were anxious. Men were asking how long they were to go on withdrawing. It was all very well to say that ruined villages and the husks of towns were no good to the Germans, but surely, sooner or later, the British Army must turn and strike. Everyone felt sore when, day after day, came news of fresh ground given up, ground for which they had fought so bitterly. The names of the places were like familiar friends, and it didn't seem possible that they could intend to give them up so quickly.

There were marches and counter-marches, but always it ended in a further retirement. Occasionally they were moved to another sector, either to support tired troops or to rest themselves. Once from a hill-top they had a view of a busy countryside, and hope came back to them. The hill was very steep and the road wound upwards like a spiral staircase. Every now and then a turn in the road brought a glimpse of the country spreading out below like a green carpet, stained here and there with the black smudge of a wood,

the white trickle of a road. Far in the distance there were hills, faint and dim as though built out of mist. Tim, gazing down, could pick out smaller objects every minute. He became aware of movement. The whole countryside seemed to be moving slowly, instinct with life. Close under the hill a column of lorries crawled along. They looked so near the summit that Tim thought if he jumped straight down he would land in the midst of them. He could see dust in the wake of each lorry, until one by one they were lost among trees, leaving only a powdery haze where they had passed.

Further away infantry on the march looked like a snake, especially at a bend in the road. Here and there a steel helmet glinted; one could see the gaps separating the companies and a tiny figure on horseback at the head of each. Behind the infantry there were transport waggons. It was a still day and Tim could hear laughter. More infantry moved along other roads. A staff car would dash suddenly out of trees. One could follow it mile after mile, until it disappeared in a village. A train-whistle screeched across the fields. Tim could see the smoke from the engine hanging lazily in the air. He watched the train and saw a column held up at a level crossing, and

could imagine a peasant woman with a scarf over her head removing the barriers. Then he caught sight of another train. This time there were cattle-trucks full of khaki. Behind it on a road running parallel something moved ponderously and more slowly than anything else he had seen. Tim made out the long muzzle of a big gun. There were others behind, each towed by a lorry. They were all quaintly camouflaged.

He saw a tankodrome, and beyond it a small reach of canal. Activity everywhere, all tending in one direction. Vaguely Tim made for himself a symbol. Troops, lorries, guns, all going up towards the lines by the roads that led to war.

"It's like a great animal going to spring," he said to Curly.

"It's got a 'ell of a long tail, then," said Curly.

"But its claws are mighty sharp."

After days of fighting, ending always in withdrawal, the Battalion came back to rest, and passed close to the foot of the hill. They came down a slope to the beginnings of a town, the first small houses. The shutters were closed, so that the windows were blind eyes. There were white shutters, brown shutters, green shutters, with a mantle of dust over them, for there was a

continuous traffic. There was little life in the town, few people to be met even in the wider streets with bigger houses. In the cobbled square lorries were parked, and a man was swilling wheels with water. Another man was filling buckets at a pump in a yard. Tim read D.A.D.O.S. in neat black letters on a low door, and, further on, MEDICAL INSPECTION ROOM, written in chalk and by now half obliterated. In one corner of the Square there was a brown-shuttered café. It had window boxes full of red and blue flowers. Outside on the pavement there were chairs and small tables, and the open door gave Tim a glimpse of a red-tiled floor sprinkled with sand. In an adjoining shop a peasant girl was buying some vegetables, and a woman in black was filling a basket.

They turned off down a side street where there were a number of shops. One had a window decked with writing tablets and picture postcards and novels in cheap editions —Bourget, Bordeaux, Anatole France; even a few English novels. Another shop displayed pots and pans and coffee-machines and queer china ornaments. A third had watches and rings made out of bullets and fragments of shell. They passed a very old church. Above the elaborately carved porch a bird sang, and close by there was a fruit

stall where a woman in a bright blouse was selling oranges. An olive-skinned woman with black hair and dark eyes leaned from an upper window between half-closed shutters and shouted something to the men. Tim had a faint recollection of a picture of old Spain he had seen somewhere long ago.

When the men had been distributed in their billets Curly and Tim went out to explore, and Tim, whose mind was full of the war he had left, felt that he would never want to leave such a peaceful place. They came down an alley-way to an old bridge and watched the water, with twigs and bits of refuse on it, floating round a corner. Here O'Hanlon found them and handed Tim a letter, and here in a place of quiet Tim learned that he was the father of a girl, and that his wife was as well as could be expected. He showed Curly the letter, and they shook hands.

"What you goin' to call it?" said Curly.

"Don't know. Been reckoning on a boy. Must start thinking of girls' names again."

"For Gawd's sake get a sensible one. There's bags of good names, and yet blokes go an' call their kids Ermyntrude an' all kinds o' stuff like that."

"I'm all for calling her Marjorie. The wife likes the name, too. Think we'll

probably settle on Marjorie. My God, I wish I could be back there. It is rough. It's damned rough."

"Life's mostly rough," said Curly.

Towards evening, when they walked back to their billets, the evensong of the guns came faintly over the fields. At times there was the sound of the bigger guns, like heartbeats deep in the earth. Tim lay awake a long time, thinking of what had happened in Putney, trying to picture small clutching hands and podgy little wrists and half-closed eyes. He turned from side to side, wondering. And then he began to think of the trenches. Supposing he were to get killed now, just after hearing the news. Things did happen like that in the war. He knew cases. He'd seen a man almost mad with despair, a man mortally wounded, who had never seen his son and whose wife had died in giving birth. "It might be worse." Curly's phrase came back to him. It might be worse, of course it might. There was always hope, and yet . . . how hard it was to keep the failing fire of hope alight. There seemed to be no fuel anywhere.

It was the same old story when they moved up again. They held on to a position for two nights and days, and then the order came to withdraw. They marched for a long while,

passing through villages that they knew well. They came to one village that the Battalion had helped to capture after long fighting. It was near dawn, and everyone was hungry and tired. Tim was wondering how much further they were to go back. "Perhaps there's some mistake," he thought. And then, suddenly, outside a little broken-down house they saw a General. The General smiled, and something in his personality made the men take heart. He wouldn't smile if things were really as bad as they seemed. Curly told the story afterwards to a group of dismal disappointed men of another regiment, to cheer them up.

"'E was standin'," said Curly, "with 'is legs wide apart an' 'is 'ands be'ind 'is back—one o' them chaps with red all over 'is 'at, red an' gold an' stuff. 'E was grinnin' too, like 'ell. 'E looked that cheerful, although 'is boots was pretty dirty an' 'is uniform torn in one place. 'E needed a shave, too, bad. 'But anyway 'e kep' smilin', an' that was good enough for us blokes, I can tell you. 'Is face seemed to be kind o' sayin', 'What the devil are you chaps frettin' over? Everything's all serene. Carry on.' Presently, when we come up closer to 'im and was marchin' by, 'e took the salute and shouted something that made our officer smile all over.

Then 'e spoke, the red 'atted chap did, to the Sergeant-Major, an' made 'im smile too. When we left that village I believe we was most of us smilin'. We felt a deal better, even old 'Arry what 'ad cruel rheumatism. We kind of felt things wasn't so desperate. I tell you, there's summat in the wind, mates.''

There was general laughter at Curly's story. People began to wonder if there was something in the wind.

Half-way through a village came the order to halt, and the men fell out and dropped down for a rest. There were two small boys playing in the street further on, and down the middle of the road jolted a cart driven by an old peasant woman. Tim watched the boys playing, and looked back at the old woman when she had passed. It was a relief to find any kind of peaceful activity after so much fighting. One had begun to wonder if normal life did still continue anywhere.

There came a sound like a high wind in firs. There was a loud crash behind the men, followed by splintering glass. A fragment of cobble-stone was hurled against the wall of a house. Tim, looking back, heard a cry half pain, half dismay. Whistles blew from different parts. It was time to find cover. The two boys were taken from

their game and carried into a sandbag shelter. Tim caught a glimpse of the old woman whipping up her horse as she disappeared round a corner. After a short interval the next shell burst. One wall of a house shook, leaned sideways, split into fragments, and crumbled over the cobbles.

For some time the shelling continued. There was a perpetual noise of falling masonry. Tiles and bricks rained down on the cobbles. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped. People came out cautiously from the shelters and went anxiously towards their homes. The children did not cry much. They simply gazed in astonishment at the unfamiliar look of the streets they knew so well. These were the streets in which they had played, down which they had gone to school.

Curly pointed to two American soldiers in a doorway.

"This'll be a good trainin' for them," he said. "'This is the sort o' thing they ought to see."

"See that crowd up there," said Tim. "Expect that old woman with the cart was caught. Let's go and have a look."

They walked in the direction of the crowd, and round the corner they found a big rent in the cobbles and a wheel and a mass of wood

and canvas. At the side of the street a horse lay with a gash in its flank. Near to it there was something pitifully disfigured, all that was left of the old woman.

* * * * *

All through these days Spring was coming. Tim found little difference in the seasons, but O'Hanlon looked for primroses in quiet woods behind the fighting, and listened for the song of the birds. They were in the trenches when the sun shed the first real warmth of the year. Tim and Curly, filling sandbags, felt the warmth on their necks.

"Spring!" said Tim.

"Spring!" said Curly.

And Curly thought of Camden Town streets and here and there a girl in white muslin, moving along the pavement like a flower. Tim thought of the colour of Kew Gardens, and the trees, and anemones in Surrey woods.

"Makes you kind of glad to be alive, this weather," he said. "Thirsty weather coming."

"This is about the time," said Curly, "when someone at 'ome does the summer underclothes stunt on you, just when you think you've got a big parcel o' cake."

"Yes," said Tim, "and tins of vermin-killer and patent powders."

Twang!

"Mind out," said Curly, "it's that blinkin', flamin' son of a sea-cook snipin' at us again."

Later on an artillery duel began, and Tim and Curly sat in the bottom of the trench, warming their faces in the sun.

"Kind of something in the air," said Curly. "Gives you a feelin' of Spring."

Towards evening the Germans seemed to be turning every gun in the sector on to that trench. Hour after hour the sandbags whirled into the air and the earth shook. They sent over gas shells, and all along the Battalion front white balls of smoke drifted. The air was full of the wobbling sound that heralds the gas-shells. There was shrapnel too, and the casualties were heavy. But there was no question of giving ground. The now famous order of the day rang in every man's ears. "Backs to the wall. Backs to the wall."

They stood firm. It is only on looking back that one realizes that the tumbled sandbags and dishevelled earth were not the British line; that the actual British line was something intangible; it ran, electric, a kind of spiritual presence, from man to man, all down the line. We call it tradition, but Tim and Curly only knew they were doing their

job, and O'Hanlon, maybe, was still dreaming of burning battlements, the music of blade on blade, and all the old things of minstrelsy.

The German infantry attacked.

The British seemed to be fighting against superior numbers all the time. They knew they were inflicting losses on the enemy, but there were always more to take the places of the fallen.

Tim turned to Curly.

"I've written off," he said, "yesterday morning to the wife, telling her we'd better settle on Marjorie for the name."

Curly looked hard at him, wondering what was passing in his mind.

Hour after hour the Germans attacked, until Tim lost sense of time. There was no question of rations being brought up. Men were hunting for crumbs in their haversacks, and rubbing their fingers round the insides of jam tins. Tim pressed muddy lips to the neck of his water-bottle, and found it almost empty. Looking down he saw the trench littered with cartridge cases and clips. His head was aching and his legs were weak. He began to fire again. Many wounded men had struggled up, and were trying to use their rifles. For the critical moment had come. The Germans were in the trench. The

defenders were being forced down towards the communication trench by sheer weight of men. They were failing. Every man knew it in that instant. Their General had trusted them to hold on; their Brigadier had said no other troops could do it. He had said he knew they would not "let him down." And now they were failing. If the whole British Army failed, the Colonel had said, his men would not fail. He had told the General so. Their officers were dead or knocked out, and there was nobody left to rally them, no personality strong enough; besides, they were worn to the bone. They had done their best, and it had not been good enough. Other troops would be sent to retrieve what they had lost, and it would be more, immeasurably more, than just a bit of ground that they would have lost. At any rate, whatever happened they would not give in. No one of them should bring news of their failure. They would just be found lying there on the ground, and then people would know how desperately they had tried.

They fought on, angry at their impotence.

And then, a lightning flash, came a voice. It carried a personality with it, carried a personality among them, went through them like a flame. Tim looked and saw on a mound of earth where the trench wall had

fallen in, O'Hanlon; saw him raise his arm. Rifle pointing skywards, he shouted, twice, the name of his regiment. Twice he shouted that one word, and there was an answering murmur. They went at his heels like madmen. All their anger was in that charge, and the Germans wavered and broke. They were driven back up the communication trench and out into No Man's Land, and then the British settled down to hold firm again until relief came.

The relief came, but O'Hanlon lay still on the ground.

Men of his regiment could show you where it happened. They will tell you, if you meet them, how it happened. They will describe his shout in their own way, how he stretched his arm, how he looked. They will tell you how his battle-cry became something of a tradition. They will swear that in tight corners they have heard his voice. Some say they have seen him. Wherever the regiment fights his spirit lives on.

And so he died; not unlike some legendary hero, with a battle-cry on his lips. And so Grania in Chelsea, hearing a knock at the door, turned from her window, knowing in that instant that he had been dead many hours. For one moment she looked back out of the window at the gray river, as if she

wished to keep for ever in her mind that last instant alive with him. Now she was dead with him.

When she had read the few words of writing she picked up a hairpin that had fallen from her hair and replaced it. Then she put some flowers straight, and changed the position of a cushion. Outside a paper boy was shouting. "British hold firm!" he shouted. She could see people buying papers from him, and she made a low sound like a laugh.

A day or two later she received two letters from France. One told her how proud the regiment was of him, and how he had died as they were sure she would have wanted him to die. "He will be missed more than I can say," it ended. "He will be missed . . ." Again she wanted to laugh. The second letter said:

"Dear Miss Derry,

Curly and me thought you would like to have this. It was the last letter he wrote, he wrote it in case anything happened. We just want to tell you how sorry we are for you. We know what he was like and we look up to him like everyone who knew him must.

With all our sympathy,

TIM HIMRICK and CURLY."

This made her cry.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TIDE TURNS.

There was going to be another attack. That was obvious. For some time there had been a heavy bombardment. Curly was picking the larger bits of grit out of his jam, and Tim was stirring a mug of anæmic-looking tea with the handle of his jack-knife. There was no knowing when there would be a chance of another meal, so they took advantage of what Curly called a quiet moment. He had almost finished telling a story.

"What did he say then?" asked Tim.

"'E said 'D'you love us, honey?'"

"And what happened?"

"Why, she upped an' let 'im 'ave it straight from the shoulder. 'This ain't a bee-'ive,' she said, an' then—"

Stand to! Stand to! Stand to!

The word went down the trench, the men

seized their rifles and lined the parapet. Something rose like a wave over the German parapet, and the fighting began. As usual Tim and Curly were side by side.

"I'll tell you the end of it when this jaunt's over. 'E treated 'er pretty rough," said Curly.

An officer hurried by behind them. Tim rested his rifle in a grove between two sandbags and prepared for the worst. The Lewis guns were already firing, and, for a moment, as so often happens at a crisis, Tim was acutely aware of details. He noticed how badly Curly needed a shave, and that his own finger-nails were long and very dirty. Presently he began to fire as fast as he could. A bullet zipped into the sandbag near his right arm, another left an echo in his ears as if someone had struck an electric bell inside his head. A shell burst in front of him. He ducked, and heard something moan overhead. At the same time his rifle was jerked. One of the sandbags against which it rested tumbled against him. There was earth in his eyes and grit in his mouth. He shifted his rifle and saw that the man on his left had blood on his face.

"You're hit, mate," he said; but it was like trying to shout through a hurricane. Then it seemed as if the whole trench rocked.

He was knocked against the parados.

"God," said somebody in a quiet, deep, hollow voice.

Presently Tim realized that this was not an attack on a big scale. It was, apparently, a feeler. For the Germans withdrew after testing the strength of the defenders.

Curly turned to Tim.

"Where 'ad I got to?" he asked.

"She'd just given him the bird."

"Oh, yes, I know. Well the end of it was that she went and married 'im. She found 'e had money. Just like 'er."

They set to work to repair the trench, and presently Tim, looking round, said,

"Not such a bad spot."

"Might be worse. I could do with a meal. Got a fag?"

"Coming over."

"Got a match?"

"Got some loose somewhere."

"Got a—?"

"Look here," said Tim, "do you happen to want a furnished house, or any little thing like that?"

"No, thanks," answered Curly. "This lot'll do. Large an' airy. Barbed wire fittin's. Gas laid on thick. No winders to be cleaned. Bit noisy. Fairly respectable neighbour'ood. 'Ellish long lease."

Tim laughed and went on with his work.

"Another scrap soon, I suppose," he said.

"Expect so; seen Bob?"

"Yes. Bit dazed. He's been under twice."

"You bin under?"

"Only once. Got out mighty quick."

He dug on in silence. Presently Tim looked up again.

"Not a bad field of fire," he said.

"Muck-swamp o' fire, I call it," said Curly.

"Well, it smells as sweet by any name."

"Come down orf it, Milton."

For the remainder of that spell in the trenches they were working at the parapet. The Germans did not attack again. But rumours came from other parts of the line, rumours of terrific fighting. The rumours continued for many days while they were in billets. Finally, after some weeks, it was known that the French had counter-attacked. "Is this the end?" Tim said to himself. In these days people scanned English papers eagerly. They even got hold of French papers and tried to decipher them. Any man from the line was bombarded with questions. Time went on, and counter-strokes, like a series of fires lighted all along the British and French front, blazed up into

one gigantic flame. British and French fought literally shoulder to shoulder, as they had done in the critical days of the last few months.

One day there will be written a tale of Meteren and Vierstraat. It will tell, too, of the four British divisions that were between Cerny and Berry-au-Bac at the end of May. It will tell how the massed German troops drove down on them, drove through to Château Thierry and to Fismes; how the British fell back, fighting all the way, to the Vesle; how the eighth division held a line of six miles, covering thirty-four bridges; how the fog came down over the battle. It will tell of the fight of the Berkshires, and of the Lancashire men who came up in support.

Already Tim could gather scraps of information; graphic pictures drawn with the vivid simplicity of soldiers. He met a man in an Estaminet wildly enthusiastic about Meteren.

"But," said Tim, "that was quite a small show."

"I know all that," he said, "but, good Lord! well, I can tell you a tale about it. At the beginning of this jolly old war the Gerboy cavalry withdrew to Meteren—it was in October, I remember; and we bundled 'em out of it afterwards. I was with the old

third division in those days. Well, we found some people there. They were mighty glad to be rid of the lousy Boche. There was one lot on a farm that simply couldn't do enough for us. I got great friends with 'em, and we stopped in that sector a bit when the Gers were on Whitesheet Ridge. After a hell of a time they was shoved back, and we came there again. We used to be billetted there. Barns and red brick is about all I remember of the place, and, of course, the folks at the farmhouse. There was an Estaminet, too, with a rum name, the Veritable Cuckoo, or something like that. Don't know how they pronounced it. We used to go by it on the way back to Bailleul. Those farm people had long memories, I can tell you. The way they were always grateful made a bloke feel stupid. Kind of book hero with golden hair and blue eyes, and all that. They loved the place, too. Remember one of them saying if ever the Gers got back there, even if they themselves were na-pooed, they'd hate to think of the lousy Boche living in their home. Course we told 'em Fritz could never get back. So you can guess we were pretty fed when they bagged the place again this year. We felt we'd kind of failed in a trust. I often wondered what happened to the people, and wished our lot could have a knock

at the Gers, to try and get the place back. And then comes the news. Reckon you can see why I'm pleased. Even if the place is busto we'll have the ground where it stood. And in some sort o' way it was our home, after all. It's like that out here. They say a soldier's home is wherever he sleeps, and I expect every bloke's got a village in his mind that he thinks of in that way out here. Next time we're up that way, you bet I'll make a bee-line for the old place."

One saw the cavalry, too, in those days. Tim watched them once from the doorway of a barn. They began to pass in the afternoon, and at twilight they were still passing.

"Must be something pretty big on somewhere," said Tim.

"That's the stuff to give 'em," said Curly.

The character of the fighting changed. There were fewer of those terrible nights in trenches and more skirmishing in open country. There were rambling fights in woods and by streams. On one occasion Tim found himself crawling up towards a wood; cautious explorations and tentative creeping among shell-holes had disclosed Germans scattered in the neighbourhood of the wood. Tim's Battalion came suddenly on a fringe of them, lying behind ridges and mounds. It was a question of every man for himself after

that. The Germans fought stubbornly in spite of the surprise. Now one side gave ground, now another. A Surrey regiment, which formed the centre of the attack, went forward even more slowly than the wings. Theirs was to be the final rush, and Tim's Battalion was among them.

Night wore away as they fought. There was a moment of crisis when the Germans made an attempt to drive a wedge into the centre; but a Battalion that had been waiting in support was rushed up at the double, and arrived in time. After that the advance gathered speed. Inch by inch they fought their way up a ridge, men of many regiments intermingled, and saw slightly below them a village stained with the dregs of night. The first gray of dawn revealed the Germans hurrying towards the village, to make a last stand in its very gates, in trenches that British shells had flogged to dust. Among rags of sandbags the Germans rallied.

Away on the left of the village, in a shattered wood, there was a crashing of undergrowth. Like great beasts, moving deliberately on their prey, the tanks came. The infantry swept on. The fiery courage of triumph met the dogged courage of despair. The Germans were pressed back into the arms, as it were, of the tanks. That is the

moment when, in popular stories of war, the weary men collect prisoners, light cigarettes, and lie down to sleep. The reality is different. Every man had his task. There were the wounded to care for and the victory to be consolidated, in preparation for counter-attacks. Isolated groups of Germans were found in dugouts and cellars. A great store of wine was found, and quantities of machine guns. German signs and notices were torn down.

Ahead of the village the tanks patrolled, and on the right smoke signals went up and there was the sound of fighting. A staff officer at an advanced divisional headquarters chronicled on a map yet one more captured objective.

The next morning the Battalion pushed forward again, and Tim and Curly trod ground that had not known the British for four years. Stretcher-bearers were coming back across open ground. There were parties already at work repairing roads, levelling them for guns and lorries and all the traffic of war. A batch of walking cases came over a ridge, and on their right plodded a long column of weary German prisoners. A staff captain, with a gay brassard on his arm, was inspecting a road, with a sergeant in shirt-sleeves at his side. Overhead there was the

throb of a powerful engine, and, looking up, one saw a 'plane with the sun on it. Rumours came back from the line all the time.

"Met a bloke who said we was clean through."

"Our lot's right up agin the wood yonder."

Towards evening the air grew stiller. One could hear voices coming from a great way through the summer evening. Tim had again the impression of a big animal creeping forward. When night fell the guns broke into thunder again, waking sleepers behind the lines.

Tim, bivouacing in a hollow, thought of O'Hanlon, and then of his own years of war, and of life after the war.

"It will be great to settle after all this," said Tim to Curly. "Some little house in the country."

"I saw the sort o' place you want," said Curly. "Long time ago, on leave, I ran across it. Rum little cottage, on a country road; seemed to 'ave bin dropped there an' kind of forgotten, as 'ow you might say. It 'ad a smallish garden with bags o' different coloured flowers, all the colours of the flamin' rainbow—tall flowers, short ones, thick ones, thin ones, weak-lookin' things, all sorts. It 'ad a field at the back where cows was

swishin' their tails. Suit you a rare treat. Course you'd 'ave to start thinkin' about a name. The poet bloke was all wrong. There's an 'ell of a lot in a name. You don't want no 'igh-falutin' stuff about 'Mount Pleasant' or 'The Wisterias' or 'Nasturtium Villa.' Every bloke pinches them names. You got any ideas about it?"

"Depends on the house," said Tim. "I'd have to see it, of course, and the country all round about it."

"Well, look 'ere, when this job's through, we'll go an 'unt for it. You'll take it when you see it. I'll come down and we'll 'ave a day in the garden. Diggin' 'an all that, just to keep our 'ands in for the next war what rolls along our way."

Here he winked slowly and solemnly.

"After we've dug ourselves in be'ind a parapet of 'taters or carrots we'll 'ave tea. None o' your rotten drawin'-room sandwich affairs—all chatterin' and smirkin' and no tea. We'll 'ave a proper set-to."

"What sort of a view has it got?" asked Tim.

"Bags o' view. 'Ills, lanes, fields, woods, cows. Birds singin' fit to bust. Bit of a stream back o' the garden. Oh, an' there's an apple-tree somewhere about. Teach your kid to climb it."

"I'm thinking of the name," said Tim. "How do you like 'Heart's Ease?'"

"Too rasted story-bookish. Reminds you o' girls pinin' for love, an' blighters spoutin' poetry into the fire, an' all that muck. Candle-light, and great sobs an' sighs an' eye-rollin'. 'Ot whispers an' 'is breath 'overin' all over 'er deculty neck. You know all that gaff. 'George,' she 'issed, 'come to my room to-night, next to the Duke's dressin' room. Knock twice an' I will 'and you the fatal letter.' 'You mean it?' 'e groaned, 'ardly able to believe 'is voice. 'Woman, I love you with a bloody awful passion—'"

"Cut it out," said Tim. "How do you like 'Journey's End?'"

"Thought o' that, but it's too sentimental like. Want something straightforward. Journey's End. Reminds me of 'Mother, I 'ear my dead sister's voice a-callin'.' All your ideas of names are a bit like them novels, mate. I believe you got a kind o' secret vice. You read all them penny things about good-lookin' footmen bein' Earls, an' 'ow their kids burn wills by mistake. I could write one o' them, straight I could. Now if you ask me for a name, I'm dished. Up to the hips in thick soup. I don't know no names. Where I come from we're just number so-an'-so. Our 'ouses don't run to names an' gates

an' porches. Wonder if there's a book printed givin' lists o' names?''

"How about 'The Elms?' "

"There wasn't none in sight."

They left the matter there, and rolled themselves up in their blankets. But some time afterwards they were reminded of the conversation. They were coming out of the line. They were singing a song about wild, wild women, having left trenches and unpleasant things behind them. They came, very tired, all of them, across a plain where everything was dead. The Company Commander decided to give them a long halt.

They sat down by the side of a track, removed their packs, and tilted their helmets back. A little way from Tim and Curly there rose, out of widespread desolation, a jagged chunk of stone that might once have been a strong wall. Behind there were the charred remains of a house. Curly and Tim sauntered towards it and sat down. Tim stood up almost at once, and began to examine the crumbling wall and the blackened bricks of the house. On one side two empty window-frames were left, blind eyes; Tim looked through them, straight through them to nothingness. It was like having opened a door to enter a room and finding nothing beyond the threshold. A tree stripped of

leaves and branches leaned over to one side, and near it, coming up from a mound of dusty soil, there were flowers. The tree was charred at the base.

"Once upon a time," said Curly, "this 'eap o' bricks was a first-class billet."

"Doesn't look much cop now," said Tim.

"Must 'ave bin about the size o' the 'ouse I was tellin' you about. Your cottage. My Gawd! Tim, supposin' anyone did this to your place, wouldn't you see flamin' red?"

"That I would."

"Those winders like as not looked out on a garden, a bright bit of a garden. The tree must 'ave nearly looked in at the winder. Can't you see 'em all eatin' breakfast in there with the tree watchin' 'em, kind of?"

"Busto now," said Tim.

"Like as not the people as owned it was drove out. Murdered, maybe. Wonder if they'll ever come back, if they're alive. Suppose someone'll build another place 'ere. Can't be the same, but it'll be a new start. Nothing can't be the same any more."

Imagine being driven from your home, imagine it, you, in England. It is the place you have lived in for long years. And now you, madam, and you, sir, are separated from each other and from your family and your friends. Imagine that for four years you

have been in exile among men repulsive to you in every way. Often, against your will, you have had to work for them. You have seen folk of your own country bullied and beaten and insulted. Sometimes you have seen parties of prisoners, men who fought for you. You have noted their half-starved look, their lifeless eyes. You have seen their captors spit at them. You have been forced, at the point of the bayonet, to carry and unload munitions, and to work on railroads. Continuous hunger has made you weak, but that does not matter to your captors. When you had no strength to do your daily task you were thrown into verminous cells. There was no furniture, save perhaps a bench. There was nothing to keep you warm. Bread and water were your food, and the sentries enjoyed the joke tremendously. You longed for news of your family, but no news came to you. You could only guess what had befallen them by what you saw around you.

Often in the long cold nights, when the tortured mind refused healing sleep, thoughts came; thoughts of that little house, and the gay garden, and the well-known faces. From time to time scraps of news filtered through, news of the war; stories of battles, rumours of coming events. The wish all the time fathered the thought. You seized on

anything that might be construed as good news, as a starving man grabs food. But over and over again there were disappointments. Always the bread was a stone. In the March days of 1918 you were thrown back on your own character. The news was bad. The Germans were elated, triumphant. You heard boasts of what would follow. You tried to keep alive your spark of faith.

And so July came.

The months that followed brought back your hope. There was a change in your captors. Fear was among them. They broke out into unreasonable angers and petty cruelties. Their guns went back. The voices of the British guns drew nearer. And then one glorious day troops, Allied troops, marched in with a band. You lay awake all that night, but not with a tortured mind. You were remembering that little house, the village, all the ways of the people, every minutest detail of that old life. You were remembering sons and daughters, relations, friends. Rumour said that but little damage had been done in your village.

One day you set out for your home. You knew the way so well, after a certain point. You knew the landmarks, some of which remained; here an old tree; there a spire. You began to picture what the first glimpse

would be like. You knew you would come to it suddenly, through a fringe of trees. You would see your own house standing near the church.

A few moments more—the trees are gone. Used, of course for wood for the trenches or dugouts. A few paces where the trees should have been, and then, and then . . . .

A mist over your eyes prevents you from seeing clearly. You walk on, blind with tears. Perhaps Jack is there already, and May. You see nothing. You look where the house should be. You see nothing. You dab at your eyes with a handkerchief until they are no longer wet. Then you see clearly. Quite clearly you see now.

Here it is, your house.

Burnt, razed to the ground, dead.

CHAPTER XIX.

ARMISTICE.

Day by day the British and French advance continued, and the Germans fell back, according to Allied plan. The spirits of the men rose. They came on country almost untouched by war. Village after village was liberated. There were triumphal entries with bands. Curly was kissed and Tim was kissed. It began to look as if the whole elaborate fabric of the German Army might crumble to the ground at any moment. Yet they fought on stubbornly. Demoralization attacked certain regiments, but others contested every foot of ground. They fought splendid rearguard actions, thanks chiefly to their machine gunners. There were stories up and down the line of batteries captured with every gunner dead at his post. Curly had fourteen precious days of leave, and a week later Tim had his. When they returned their Battalion was marching hard by day, and resting, sometimes, at night. There was

little resistance on their front. They felt that the war must be nearing its end. They were in touch with the Germans all the time, on their very heels.

And then the papers began to talk about an Armistice.

Tim's Battalion, pressing on, found themselves one evening isolated. They had gone too fast, and were out of touch with and far ahead of those on either side of them. They settled down to hold their ground and wait. And while they waited the German resistance stiffened. More troops were brought into the line. A heavy barrage was put down behind the Battalion. Things looked bad.

A short while later columns were seen coming down a crooked road towards the line. They disappeared in a hollow. Everybody guessed that they were massing to attack. It seemed to Tim a very big event. The whole British advance seemed to be in danger. He was amazed, afterwards, to find no account of what happened in the papers.

Somehow or other the gunners must be told. At any moment the barrage might shorten and the attack develop. Someone must run back through the barrage. Every second was vital.

Tim would go.

"I'll go, sir," he said. "I was a bit of a runner before the war. Long-distance."

After he had spoken he began to wonder how fit he was for the strain. It would be very different from carrying an ordinary message, or running in an ordinary race. It would be the race of his life, no doubt at all about that. "Like running to hell," he said to himself, watching the barrage. The whole world seemed to be reverberating with the banging of giant iron doors.

He wished he hadn't smoked quite so many cigarettes lately.

He received his orders, and then, almost unconsciously he clenched his fists in the old way, bent down and started. The sticky mud made it difficult going, and above all things he dreaded a stitch. He must harbour his strength for the critical moments. That damned barrage . . . . He floundered along. Shells began to fall near him. He had to keep all his wits about him to prevent himself from falling into holes. It was getting dark. He had a sudden vision of those gray-coated men massing in the hollow; perhaps they were preparing to start at that very moment, and then that infernal barrage might come leaping, howling towards him. It was just like running to hell. Those jagged flames . . . . Why had he been

so eager to do this? It was a bachelor's job. And with the war nearly over . . . How futile to go and get killed at the very end. He began to suspect that it wasn't anything big, this attack; just local. And he might be knocked out at any moment. Where were the gunners, anyhow? He began to wonder if he could remember all the officer had told him. Of course nobody knew exactly where anybody was.

He came abruptly on an old disused trench, and jumped in. Ahead of him the earth was spouting up. It seemed to be seething, boiling. His heart was pounding against his ribs and his breath came jerkily. Those cigarettes . . . second wind . . .

Further on men coming up had been caught in the shelling; caught badly. The trench was all shattered. He had to clamber over mounds and sandbags that blocked the way. He began to notice details.

He passed a man standing against the wall of the trench stock-still. His face was white and his eyes were like the eyes of nothing human. He simply stood and stared. His lower jaw was trembling, and his right arm shook. Further on Tim was held up where two men were working with spades. Something was making a sound under a heap of earth, and two arms grabbed frantically at the air.

He was nearly lifted off his feet by an explosion behind him. He was in the heart of the barrage now. He saw a road ahead. It looked near, but it came no nearer. It was like struggling on in a nightmare; an interminable race. Then an idea fastened itself like a leech into his brain. "You're not getting there quick enough. You must go faster—faster—faster . . ." "But I can't go faster," he answered himself. "I'm nearly beat now, and I don't know how much further I've got to go. Where are the blasted guns?"

He stumbled out into the open again, and was dimly aware of a great glory of gold in the sky, strangely peaceful stars above a world of twisting fire and cataracts of earth. He was very near the road now. That was the road he'd been told about. The guns would be there. Thank the Lord! "Now for it," something whispered, and he prepared to summon that reserve of stamina that all good runners hoard for the last spurt. He seemed to be moving in a land of small earthquakes. Mud struck his face and his clenched hands. "If I get through," he thought, "if only I get through." It seemed to be raining mud. Ever and again a fragment of something more deadly whined by. A bit of shell ripped the side of his left

boot. It grazed the flesh, and he felt a sudden sharp burning, like the application of a slab of ice. He thanked God it hadn't lamed him.

He started to sprint for a dusky pathway; he slid down and landed on the road just in time to be thrown against a smashed dugout. A piece of wood passed close to his head. He picked himself up, feeling dizzy, and looked round. He looked up the road and down it. No guns there. No guns in sight. He realized that his work was not yet over. There were three bodies lying in the road outside the dugout. He stared at them stupidly. The sweat was blinding him, and his left foot smarted. He began to run again. He passed a man with a pipe in his mouth, calmly binding up another man's leg. Somehow he must get the gunners. He blundered on, trying to think, trying to make some plan, or to recall the instructions he had been given. On the road, the officer had said. Must be further on. He came to an aid-post and saw a row of brown stretchers, and men smoking. He even noticed that the M.O. looked at him in a surprised way.

"Guns . . . sir," he gasped "Telephone, anywhere?"

"Right ahead. Bang straight ahead," said the M.O.

There was still time perhaps, still time if he made a last effort. He came to a tumble-down dugout and flung himself down the wooden steps. He saw, through a mist, a table and two or three men. They seemed to be coming nearer to him. He tried to shout to them, and they looked further away. His own voice seemed faint. He hit his fist against the table, swaying on his feet, trying to shout. They were signallers. He knew they were signallers.

"What's the game, mate?" said one of them.

"Ring . . . . Ring up . . . . someone—Gunners . . . Fritz . . . massing . . . up . . . there. Attack . . . Fritz massing L.A. 6.5."

Somebody moved.

"All right," he heard someone say.

He moved to the entrance of the dugout, his ears strained, his very soul waiting in suspense. There was a roaring like a swollen river in his head, but through it presently, above it, dominating it, came the voices of the British guns.

Then the roaring inside his head grew louder. His head was bursting open. A white light seemed to burn through his eyes into his brain; and after that there was stillness everywhere, a ghastly stillness.

There was no pain, only a horror of that roaring sound and a feeling of physical sickness. He toppled against some sandbags and his hands went to his face involuntarily. His body was cold, but there was still the impression of a hot white light burning behind his eyes, so white that it hurt. He wished he could see. Perhaps he was blind . . . Perhaps he . . . Somebody took hold of his arm, and feebly, with a trembling of the underlip, he began to cry softly like a woman. His whole head was on fire. He was falling, falling out of darkness into darkness. For hundreds of years he fell, and then the white light went out. He moved his lips . . .

"Li—like going—Hell," he said, "but . . . fi'est ra—race . . . whole bloo —bl—bloody li'."

Then there was oblivion.

* * * * *

When Tim opened his eyes he was lying in a bed with white sheets over him. There were other beds, all with men in them. At the far end of the room a nurse was moving about, speaking every now and then to an orderly. He watched her, until suddenly there flashed on him a memory of how he came to be there. The message. He had not

delivered it. He had not found the guns. He had failed. He turned over in his bed, and laying his head on his arm gave himself over to misery. He realized that he was not wounded, but he felt weak and dazed, and knew that he had been knocked out. Anyway, his memory had not gone. He could remember every word of that message, every word. But it would be no good telling anybody now. What would they be saying up in the line? Perhaps they'd been cut off. His own section and his own Platoon; and Curly . . .

He drew himself up in bed.

A sister saw him move and came towards him.

"Lie still, old man," she said.

"How long have I been here, sister?" asked Tim.

"Only a day. Feeling better?"

"I'm all right, sister, but—"

"But?"

"I've made an awful mess of things."

"No, you haven't. You *must not* worry, you know. That'll make you worse."

"I had a message to—"

"I know."

"You know?"

"Yes."

"Well, I didn't—"

"Yes, you did, old chap."

"I did! What do you mean, sister?"

"Listen. The fellow who picked you up was a man coming out of the dugout you were in. You gave every man there the message about a million times over, he says. You've been muttering it most of the time here."

"Then it's all right?"

"Of course it is."

"How do you know all this, sister?"

"There's a friend of your's here, up the other end of the room. There was a big attack, but the gunners smashed it up, thanks to you. Now you just lie quiet?"

"Who's the man up there, sister?"

"He says his name is Hill."

"Good old Hill. I feel better now, sister."

He lay still for a time, and then fell into a deep sleep.

The doctor attributed his condition to shock and exhaustion, and in a very few days Tim found himself going back to the village where the Battalion was billetted. He was not to go up to the line, but was to stay behind on light duty. He was only allowed to go back because he was obviously so miserable in the hospital, Hill having been moved to England after a day.

He rode on a lorry as far as the village.

He arrived about four o'clock in the afternoon and hunted through all the Estaminets and barns for a sign of Curly.

"Where is Curly?" he asked a man he knew.

"Curly? Why, he was hit in that show, when you went down to—"

"Badly hit?"

"No. One in the leg. Soft part, too. Should 'ave seen 'im. We asked if 'e felt bad. 'E said no 'e didn't, an' that they'd 'ave 'im patched up in time for the next war all right. This one's pretty nigh over anyway."

"How do you mean?"

"Look at this."

The man produced a crumpled paper.

"If Fritz 'asn't signed this thing," he said, "in two more days, 'e'll be bust to bits and pieces."

Tim read in silence, hardly able to believe what he saw.

"How wonderful," he said. "How damned wonderful."

He was lonely without Curly, and was glad to receive a letter from Camden Town. The letter told him that Curly was already out of hospital, having got a real "cushy" one through a fleshy part of the leg.

"Save up a bit o' war for me till I get out aggain," he ended.

Tim answered the letter and wrote to Meg, and then went out into the village for a walk. He still felt weak and tired, and he wandered along slowly without paying much heed to his direction. Presently he saw a man in black civilian clothes coming towards him. He was looking to one side and then another, and sometimes paused to watch the men at work on wounded roads. The sun flashed on their spades and picks. They were levelling, filling in, rebuilding. Stumps and skeletons of trees were on his right, trees that once had the mystery of a wood. A crooked scar behind him showed where trenches ran, and an unhealed gash in the ground told a tale of a rending mine explosion. On one or two trees there were green leaves. The muttering of guns was very distant, and a lark rose high to sing of quiet places and days of peace.

As the man walked his mind was busy with the memories of years of desolation and oppression, but a fresh breeze brought him the chime of pick and shovel, and shook the cobwebs of sorrow from his mind. He stopped and spoke to Tim in English. He turned his head to listen to birds singing in the eaves of an old house.

"Soon," he said, "they will be doing this all over France, and the misery will be forgotten. The birds will come back. My garden will be shady again."

While he spoke birds passed overhead, winging towards woods. They, too, had their building to do, their homes to reconstruct.

Tim watched him go off down the road, and wondered what his sufferings had been.

So days passed for Tim, while he was regaining his strength, until one morning the Battalion was drawn up in the square and the Colonel read some news from a piece of paper. Silence followed the news, and then a murmur began, and swelled gradually.

The armistice had been signed.

"All over," said one man, "and we had 'em stiff and cold. Think of it. Another week and—what a cursed shame."

Tim, hearing him, thought otherwise. That was the point of view, he thought, of the unmarried, childless man.

He went to the edge of the village, and in the distance there was silence. He could hear a cart creaking along a road. He could hear the feet of the horse. He put his hand up to his head.

"All over," he thought, "all over, and I'm alive. I've come through safely. I

shall go home soon and put all this behind me."

His mind went back to the worst days and nights he had endured, and to O'Hanlon, Ginger, all the dead men he had known and among whom he had lived. Presently, he felt, he would realize the significance of the news he had heard. He would realize what it meant, to the full. He began to think of all the things he would be able to do. He saw his small shop, and imagined how people would be coming in again. Perhaps, after a time, it would be the same as before. There would be the same conversations, the same quiet existence. Sundays and roast-beef. That is what he wanted. He had read articles in papers, long articles about the changes war would bring about in the men; how they would never be contented to return to a humdrum life; how they would want open spaces and adventure. But he did not see things in that way. He had ridden out to his adventure, and now it was finished and he was glad. There might be others who were born with a roving spirit, or in whom war had set the spirit of unrest. He was not one of them. Generations of life in towns, years and years of sheltered life, had extinguished that restless fire which some Elizabethan Timothy may have had. He would go back

and take up his life, if possible, where he had dropped it. He would want everything to be the same as before.

All over. And while he repeated the words he was aware of something that stirred very deep down in him, something that will perhaps go unrecognized as a regret with him for a long time, until he is far enough from the noise and the hunger and the terror to see what lay under these things, often interwoven with them, the thrill of comradeship and youth and high endeavour.

All over, and those thousands lying dead, and he alive, spared. His nerves were weak still. For a moment his lip trembled. He wanted to cry, and then he laughed with a feeling of tears choked back. What would Curly say? What would Curly have said if he had been there? He wanted to see Curly again, but it would not, perhaps, be the old Curly, the one who had walked the trenches with him. No. All that was over; but surely, if one searched, there must be something in that life they had lived which one could keep, keep and use in the future.

So Tim looked out over the battlefields, perplexed by the suddenness of what had happened. He could see nothing clearly yet, gazing at his four years, not able to understand, not able to see the shining body of

Romance under the foul clothing.

War must have its glamour. Inspiration comes as a momentary uplifting; it is a state in which a man journeys beyond time and space, and is as near to things immortal as he can be in a mortal life. War's glamour is like that momentary uplifting. By the light of it men see a Cause or an Idea or a Dream, forgetting for a moment things physical. When a man becomes a soldier he has his new uniform, his new sensations, cheering and bands and popular songs. He is uplifted. And then, afterwards, all the history of his soldiering, from the splendid beginnings to the naked end, is a history of the fading of glamour. Everything strange has magic in it, and romance. The test comes when a man is face to face with unadorned realities. Yet the Englishman will have his own romance. He finds it in a ridiculous song or a trivial incident; he digs it out of a muddy trench; he fills wet sandbags with it. The music that played him to church parade on Salisbury Plain, or raised his head at the end of a route march, is squeaked on a mouth-organ. Somebody sings it; someone whistles it, and he forgets things physical. He sees, not knowing that he sees, beyond sleet and mud and agony, the Cause, the Dream, the Idea. No man can put into words what it is

that he sees, least of all he himself, who is not given to self-analysis. It is just that he finds it all worth while.

The final charge, the forlorn hope, the heroic rescue; these are the stuff of which romances are made. But there is romance of another kind, the romance of cold hours on sentry, of scraping mud off clothes, of cleaning rifles with numbed hands; and out of these is made character.

Tim does not know yet that all the magic was not quite lost. He does not know that romance was with him through all the tumult and the torture. One must realize all the unuttered, indescribable things he means when he shouts "Are we downhearted?" all that Tom, Dick, and Harry mean, unconsciously, when they roar back "No!"

EPILOGUE.

I was writing this morning. "One lie," I wrote, "breeding lesser lies, has had a sacrifice made to it such as was never imagined by any heathen god. Millions of young men, strong and full of laughter, torn to red tatters. Women and babies starved, while their husbands and fathers were passed through the flames of battle to an idol more frightful than Moloch. And now the iron sword is bent and broken off at the hilt. The hideous form, knee-deep in blood, recoils. For four years the Allies toiled up the hill, slipping back ever and again. For four years they moved among torn villages and barren fields, and now, at length, the hill is crested, and in the mists of morning rise up the pinnacles of a new world . . . . ."

I stopped then, for a bell had rung. I heard a heavy step in the room, and, turning, saw a thickset figure in khaki.

I jumped up.

"Curly!" I said.

"Me," he said.

"How are things going?"

"Fair to middlin'. Came to fetch you round to 'ave a dekko at old Tim."

"Is he back?"

"Yes, 'e's back. Cuttin' 'air again already, I believe. Don't know yet, neither, whether 'e was pivertal or slip."

"Well, can you wait a bit? I was just writing."

"Gawd! Writin'! The old war, too, I'll bet my life."

"Have a look. I'm just finishing a book about it. See how you like the ending."

He picked up the top sheet of paper and began to read. His forehead soon rippled into a frown. He put his hat down, held the paper with both hands, and brought his eyes closer to the writing.

"Yes," he said, "I s'pose it's all very fine, an' all that, but it's an 'ell of a lot o' words."

"How do you mean? What's the objection? What's your view?"

"I don't 'ave no views. I don't 'old much with talkin' an' writin' an' makin' speeches. Don't get you on a ruddy inch."

"Well, what ought I to say, then?"

"If you must be writin' things, just say 'Old Jerry's bust,' or somethin' o' that sort."

"But how about all the harm he's done, and the new world that's coming, and all that?"

He puffed at his short pipe, disconcertingly.

"New worlds is always comin'," he said. "O' course all that about pinnerkuls, or whatever you call 'em, is all right enough, but I think it would go down better if you just said, kind of—'What we got to do is not just whack 'im. That's easy. We got to think o' them as'll live when we're na poo. We got to leave things ship-shape, so as nobody in future won't 'ave a chanst o' murderin' babies an' rapin' girls an' kickin' up 'ell. We 'aven't bin just fightin' for to-morrow. We bin scrappin' for 'undreds o' years 'ence as well.' 'Ow's that suit you? Oh, an' about that 'ill they climbed. There wasn't no 'ill what took as long as that to pinch. An' I reckon you can shove in its name now. But for Gawd's sake don't make us out four years takin' it."

"Your suggestions are good," I said. "Quite sound."

So I sat down and wrote, "We haven't just been fighting for to-morrow. We've been fighting for hundreds of years hence as

well." And I added, "We've got to think of the people that will live after us."

I blotted it and read it through.

"I think that's better," I said.

"Any'ow it's more what blokes really think," said Curly.

After a while he said, relentingly:

"It seems a pity to scrap all that about babies starvin', an' 'eathen gawds. Shove in 'Jerry knows 'e's bin 'ad, badly sold, an' 'e's damn wild about it.'"

"Yes," said I, "but, you know, I can't call him Jerry in serious writing. I must say 'Germans,' or 'Huns,' or 'Boches.'"

"Seems to me," said Curly, "you're being too dignified with 'em."

We decided to leave the writing, so we went out and jumped on a Putney omnibus. We got down and walked over Putney Bridge until we came to Silverslade Street. As we came in at the shop door the bell jangled. Tim did not look up. He was bending over a customer, wiping a newly-shaved face.

"Next please," he said, and looked up.

"Come orf of it," said Curly. "I've seen too much of you with a bayonet to let you go muckin' round my throat."

Tim held out his hand.

"I'll be with you in a second," he said.

"You'll find the wife inside, and the little thing."

We went into the parlour, and there we found Meg laying the table for lunch. We shook hands. We also shook hands with the baby.

"Like old times already," said Meg, "to see him working away in there. . Too good to be true. Of course, you'll have lunch with us. Half-an-hour's time. Sit down. I'll have to go on getting the dinner."

"Think I'll 'ave a bit of a sleep," said Curly, and settled in a chair. He was soon snoring.

Tim, in the shop, in the act of sharpening a razor, paused and looked up, hearing the snore. For a long time he stared at the wall, and right through it, and over the sea to France.

THE END.

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